

Mandel Is More Than a Memory

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ANNAPOLIS—The diminutive, gray-haired man sat quietly in a foyer last week, seemingly too shy to enter a state Senate committee room before the start of a hearing on a measure opposed by his client, the doctors of Maryland.

Several senators wheeled around in surprise as they filed past Marvin Mandel, calling out, "Governor!" But an awkward pause inevitably followed, as the lawmakers pondered whether to take their seats quickly or to tarry a moment with a State House legend, the most visible link to the corrupt past of Maryland politics.

Such is the ambivalence the 72-year-old former governor inspires, even as his political rehabilitation nears completion. Released from prison by President Ronald Reagan in 1981 and his racketeering convictions overturned by a federal judge in 1987, Mandel started 1993 with one of the choicest lobbying contracts in Annapolis.

Lobbying for the state's medical society is considered a plum in any year, but stakes in this General Assembly session are unusually high for doctors. Legislators are considering significant health care revisions that could limit physicians' fees and give some doctors a new defense against malpractice lawsuits.

To many lawmakers, especially older ones, Mandel personifies a simpler, cozier time, when governors understood legislators and knew how to massage their egos. But he also is a haunting reminder of Maryland's tainted political past, when governors and speakers of the House of Delegates were indicted or imprisoned for allegedly using their offices to enrich themselves and their friends.

As leaders of the state Senate and House try to resolve differences in their health care plans before an April 12 adjournment, legislators give very mixed reviews of Mandel's effectiveness in representing the state's doctors.

"It was a terrible mistake for them to hire him," said Del. John A. Hurson (D-Montgomery), who helped craft a House bill that could lead to limits on doctors' bills.

Hurson said Mandel failed to attend important meetings when the House Economic Matters Committee was drafting the legislation and appeared ill-informed on some key issues. The medical society, Hurson said, has "an absolutely low profile" at the very moment its members face major changes in their industry.

Others agree with Hurson. The Republican leader in the House, Del. Ellen R. Sauerbrey (Baltimore

County), said in a March 19 letter to the Baltimore County Medical Association, "If the medical community has representation in Annapolis, it is invisible."

Some members of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland, known as Med-Chi, say they are satisfied with Mandel's soft-sell approach.

"He has been extremely effective," said George S. Malouf Sr., an ophthalmologist from Prince George's County and a key player in the society's decision to hire Mandel last fall. "The voice of Med-Chi has been heard. . . . We don't believe in intrigue and the twisting of arms."

Mandel says the doctors knew they weren't getting a glad-hander when they hired him to replace lobbyist Gerard E. Evans, who left in an angry dispute over his fees and medical society politics.

In an interview in his law office on State Circle, which surrounds the Capitol, Mandel said he "will never be highly visible, because I don't believe in that type of lobbying."

He said he deals with legislators now in much the same way he did as House speaker and governor in the 1960s and '70s: A quiet conversation here, a well-timed phone call there. He said Med-Chi is paying him "around \$70,000" for his work this year.

Malouf noted that when Mandel was governor, he pushed for the training of more family doctors and helped establish the state's celebrated cost-control system for hospitals.

State House insiders say Med-Chi also likes Mandel's closeness to Gov. William Donald Schaefer, who can influence or veto legislation. Schaefer was mayor of Baltimore when Mandel was governor, and nothing has shaken the friendship that developed between the two Democrats, who were born within a year of each other in Baltimore.

Mandel turned down a job offer from Schaefer when he left prison, but he has remained an informal adviser to the governor. Schaefer aides say Mandel is one of the few non-staff members Schaefer consulted before his controversial endorsement of President Bush, a Republican, in last year's presidential campaign. The aides said they believe Mandel did nothing to discourage the endorsement.

Mandel—a Democrat whose office features pictures of Republicans Bush and Reagan, but not of Bill Clinton—said he never spoke directly to Schaefer about the endorsement. He said Schaefer "felt that Bush had been good to him. . . . He's a very loyal person."

Mandel's increasingly visible role in Annapolis has been choreographed by Bruce C. Bereano, one of the state's best-known lobbyists and political fund-raisers. Bereano arranged for Washington Bullets owner Abe Pollin and other influential people to petition Reagan to shorten Mandel's four-year prison sentence to 19 months, which Reagan did in December 1981.

"I saved him a year in jail," Bereano said, adding that Mandel "treats me like a son."

In 1989, when Mandel regained the law license that his conviction had cost him, he opened his Annapolis office and Bereano began sharing some business with him. Bereano hired Mandel to help lobby the Schaefer administration on behalf of GTECH Corp., which won a nearly \$120 million contract to operate the state's lottery games.

Last year, Med-Chi approached Bereano about its lobbying job, but Bereano was unwilling to give up his lucrative tobacco clients to work for the doctors. "I very strongly recommended Governor Mandel," Bereano said, and Med-Chi quickly hired him.

Bereano calls Mandel "an absolute master of politics. . . . He has been very well received. His style is less visible, so some people don't think he's doing anything, but that's just garbage."

For the last two years, Bereano has systematically burnished Mandel's image, often inviting younger legislators to meet with him for informal chats. Del. Chris Van Hollen Jr. (D-Montgomery) recalls a 1992 breakfast in which he, Mandel and Bereano "talked about Mandel's days as governor."

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Van Hollen, 34, said that it was simply a get-acquainted affair and that the two lobbyists did not ask him for anything.

Recalling the breakfast, Van Hollen said: "Obviously your impressions are that of a governor who went wrong. . . . Although he clearly made some major mistakes that got him into trouble, as a governor he was someone who mastered the techniques of governing."

"I don't know if [the breakfast meeting] was part of a grand plan to rehabilitate Mandel in the eyes of the legislature," Van Hollen said. "Whether there has been a successful rehabilitation of him . . . I don't know. But clearly Med-Chi thinks there has."

Mandel says his legal history has caused him no problems as a lobbyist. "I'm sure there are some people who might think it should be a hindrance," he said, "but it hasn't been."

Mandel became Maryland's House speaker in 1963, succeeding A. Gordon Boone, who was jailed on corruption charges involving a savings and loan scandal. In January 1969, the General Assembly chose Mandel as governor to succeed Spiro T. Agnew, who had become Richard M. Nixon's vice president. Mandel easily won statewide elections as governor in 1970 and 1974.

In July 1973 he stunned the state—and his wife—by announcing his love for another woman and his plans to divorce. His wife, Barbara, refused to vacate the Governor's Mansion for five months, during which Mandel lived in a motel or apartment. Barbara Mandel finally relented, and Mandel married Jeanne Dorsey.

In 1973, a federal grand jury began probing allegations of political corruption in Maryland. The inquiry snared Mandel and Agnew, who resigned as vice president and pleaded no contest to tax evasion.

A jury convicted Mandel in 1977 of mail fraud and racketeering, and he went to federal prison in 1980 when his legal appeals were exhausted. He was accused of using his influence as governor to increase the value of the Marlboro racetrack in Prince George's County, which was secretly owned by friends who gave him cash and expensive gifts.

In November 1987, six years after Mandel's release from prison, a federal judge overturned the con-

viction. The judge ruled that Mandel had been convicted of depriving Marylanders of good government, which did not constitute a federal crime in light of a 1987 Supreme Court ruling.

Barnet D. Skolnik, who prosecuted the Mandel case, said after the conviction was overturned: "Nothing will ever change what Mr. Mandel did. He sold his office."

Mandel today calls his conviction unfair, saying, "The allegations didn't amount to a crime."

Asked about his experience in prison, he says that he and his wife "have put it behind us. . . . Unless the matter is brought up, as you are bringing it up now, it's as though it didn't happen."

Mandel said he might take on one or two more lobbying clients, but doesn't plan to have a big caseload. He said that legislative issues today are more complex than they were two decades ago, but that the fundamentals of Annapolis politics remain the same. "Tell me one issue today that wasn't an issue 20 years ago," he said. "There isn't one."