

Currie's acquittal teaches the wrong lesson

Maybe now it's official: Maryland's elected leaders live in — and nurture — a culture of corruption.

And yet, how sad for those lawmakers — the overwhelming majority — who work hard and play by the rules. There's no platform on which to display good work and integrity. Time after time, it seems, you're defined by the fast and loose.

The fast and loose and, apparently, the not-so-bright.

This week's not guilty verdict in the case of state Sen. Ulysses S. Currie was promoted successfully by an extraordinary bit of wagon-circling by General Assembly leaders. Maybe he forgot to dot an i — so what? He's

sented over six weeks in federal district court. Just what the law demands, the quality of the prosecution and the skill of the defense are all part of the chemistry in our system.

As the famous criminal defense lawyer Johnny Cochran famously said of telltale gloves in the O.J. Simpson case: "If the gloves don't fit, you must acquit."

Here, of course, we are talking about laws. What may have been ill-fitting were the charges brought by the U.S. Attorney's office. Bribery is notoriously difficult to prove.

And so, when prosecutors failed to make their case, a teachable moment went glimmering. The lesson we got was not the lesson we need.

"If this is to become the new standard in Maryland, a lot of lobbyists are about to be out of a job. Why bother hiring them when corporations can simply put lawmakers on the payroll?" The Baltimore Sun asked in an editorial.

He'd paid his dues

From outside Annapolis and the Baltimore courtroom, citizens must have been horrified. As low an opinion as many have of politics, this case was a new low of some importance. Currie was chairman of the Budget and Taxation Committee.

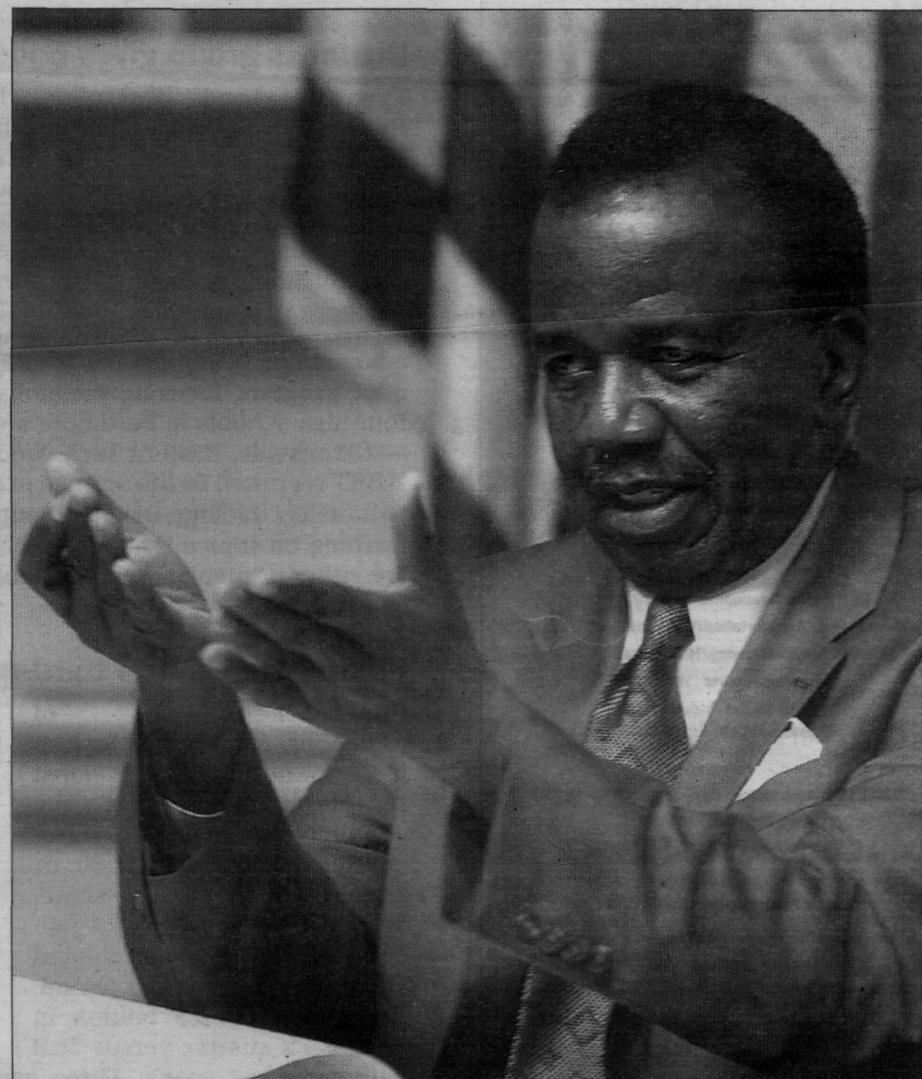
This, we can assume, is why the supermarket chain wanted him.

But how does such a man come to head such a committee? Political loyalty has been offered as the reason. He'd paid his dues. It was his turn.

This, dear reader, is a form of corruption. Everyone in politics doesn't have to be a member of Mensa, but surely a minimum level of competence should be required.

Currie got big-time support also because it was believed by insiders that others in the Assembly (or formerly there) had committed what amounted to armed robbery without consequence. Why was the hapless Currie in the dock? Here was the culture of corruption second-guessing the prosecutors.

And, of course, choosing someone with limited capability might well lead to activities that were way over the line. If you're a legislator and an important constituent has a problem, you're expected to deal with it in the



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regular course of business — not in return for cash payments.

Currie failed to report his relationship with the chain as ordered by the General Assembly in an effort to head off conflict of this sort. If you're not up to understanding what's permitted and what's over the line, a kind of ethics referee looks over your disclosure report and lets you know.

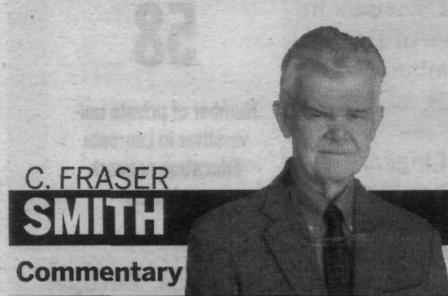
And there is this: If you promote people with limited ability, you may live to see them dragging you down.

Sen. Currie will now be investigated by the ethics police in Annapolis. He could be expelled, the political career death sentence. If so, he'll be dying for the sins of a culture.

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SMITH

Commentary

such a nice guy — not too smart, but really nice.

Some people thought Bernie Madoff was a nice guy, too — until his billion-dollar Ponzi scheme came to light.

Currie was charged with accepting bribes — a quarter of a million dollars from a supermarket food chain. Two company executives were charged along with him. They, too, were exonerated. Before the trial, the company agreed to pay a fine of more than \$2 million.

'Dumb is not a defense'

A day or two before the trial began, a lawyer-lobbyist familiar with Currie and life in Annapolis said, "Dumb is not a defense."

He said it as a joke. A few days later, however, the "I'm an idiot" defense would actually be the reed Currie's lawyers chose to lean on. It was essentially an admission that the facts were not on their side.

Yet Currie was found not guilty by 12 citizens. In our system, that means us.

But what were the jurors to do?

It was their responsibility to render a verdict based on the evidence pre-

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