

Interview: Gibson ('Gib') Lewis



'If people don't rise up,' worse economic hardship to come

Gib Lewis (D-Ft. Worth), the Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, was the target of a 17-week grand jury investigation run by Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle. The grand jury, which ended its term on April 5 after a 90-day extension, indicted Lewis on two misdemeanor charges. A member of Lewis's leadership team in the House, Rep. Hugo Berlanga, was jailed for six hours during this House term, for defying a judge's order to turn over personal and business records.

In spite of the indictments and repeated statements by Earle implying that he will find much more evidence of corruption, Lewis was reelected to an unprecedented fifth term as Speaker, with only one vote against him. At least in part due to the media hype launched by Earle in the context of his investigation, which was interpreted by many of the representatives as an attack on the integrity of the House itself, legislation is pending to reform the grand jury process. Many legal experts believe the grand jury process has been transformed from an institution designed to protect citizens from arbitrary prosecution, to one which has become a rubber stamp for prosecutors.

This interview was conducted on April 9 by Harley Schlanger.

EIR: Mr. Speaker, you have been the subject of a very public investigation, with quite wild accusations leaked almost daily to the press. Some of your supporters say you have been the target of an unfair political witchhunt. Do you have any comments on that?

Lewis: I'll have to side with my supporters. I have been the victim of a very unfair witchhunt.

EIR: Certainly, you've been the victim of trial by press.

Lewis: That's true. I think what's so disturbing about the whole incident is that it's certainly been nothing more than a media event from the very first day. Supposedly, grand jury proceedings are secret, but there was almost a daily press conference on everything that was said and who was talked to and what went on in the grand jury that day, and only one side was presented. Everyone who testified before the grand jury was sworn to secrecy with a threat of lawsuits and impris-

onment in some cases if they spoke to anybody about it. But of course, the District Attorney and Assistant District Attorney had freedom to do whatever they wanted to do, or give out any incriminating evidence they wanted to give out.

When you're tried in the press, it's very damaging to a person's reputation. That's one thing the press can take away from you that they cannot give back to you.

EIR: Some analysts have been warning that District Attorneys and U.S. Attorneys, with the press, have become highly political and have been using their offices to effect legislation, as an intrusion into the legislative process. There have been state and federal sting operations in Oklahoma, South Carolina, and elsewhere. Your predecessor as Texas Speaker, Billy Clayton, was targeted by Brilab (and later acquitted). Do you see this as a danger, that these are moves against constituency-based politicians?

Lewis: I think it's a real danger and has to be controlled. If some District Attorney wants to have real high name identity, his name overnight becomes a household word by investigating or trying to indict some politician. That's a popular thing right now, because most people dislike politicians, they distrust politicians, that's an image the press has instilled in people's minds.

When you have a prosecutor who wants to build a little name identification for a higher office, or whatever his motive might be, it's very easy to just go and investigate a certain politician. You're never held accountable for your actions, but you have destroyed that person and his reputation, it's damaging to him financially and in every other manner. And it takes away further people's trust in elected government institutions.

EIR: Do you think there is a possibility of backlash against this kind of targeting, for example legislation for grand jury reform?

Lewis: I think it will, and I think it should.

EIR: Let's turn to the state economic situation. The Texas legislature is presently under heavy pressure due to a projected deficit. How do you think things look for Texas?

Lewis: At this point it does not look good. To maintain current services—that's not adding one new prison, that's not adding any new programs, and certainly not being able to address the programs that have been handed down by the federal government to the state government, which is going to cost the state over \$1 billion a biennial just to take care of federal mandates on Department of Human Services problems—we are approximately \$4.5 billion short.

EIR: There have been figures published recently that show that 30 state governments are in financial trouble, so it's not just Texas. Yet economists in Washington are telling us the 1980s were years of great recovery and that, while we might be in a recession right now, it's going to be short, and we'll have an upturn soon. What do you think?

Lewis: Well, people in Washington can probably tell you, "Yes, we're in a recovery," and the reason they may be in recovery is an effort to balance the federal budget, what they've done is pass all those burdens down to the state. And they were not satisfied with just passing those burdens down to the state. When they passed them down to the state, they allowed the federal bureaucrats involved in those programs to broaden the recipients, to loosen the requirements, and have multiplied that expenditure many-fold to the states.

EIR: Are you expecting more of this, given the growing deficit in Washington?

Lewis: I'm afraid if the people don't rise up and let them know what they're doing, it will happen.

EIR: The Texas economy has obviously been damaged by the way the savings and loan bailout has occurred. There's a serious credit crunch here. Do you have any comments on the way the Bush administration has handled the S&L crisis?

Lewis: I think it's been handled very poorly by the federal government. Their attitude toward trying to find a solution has been to let the federal government just bail everybody out, rather than sitting down and trying to work out agreements between the lender and the person who had the mortgage or the loans. I know many cases personally where, if the federal government had allowed the savings and loans and, in some cases, the banks, to work with that individual who had those loans, they could work those loans out. And then the taxpayer would not have been subjected to near the financial backlash they are being subjected to.

EIR: You mentioned earlier that it might take some form of protest from the state and local level to shift the thinking in Washington. In 1988, Lyndon LaRouche said that state and local governments, which are under very heavy fire, will have to be the ones which sound the alarms and initiate actions to protect their constituents, especially given the domination of Washington by Wall Street and the money center banks. What can state and local governments do to

convey the depth of the crisis to Washington?

Lewis: Well, I think most states . . . are just now feeling the crunch, the financial crunch, because these programs that the federal government has given the states are just now starting to soak in, to the point that you're seeing in many states an ineptitude to balance their budgets. They don't have the flexibility for tax increases, they have to make massive layoffs. What they are doing in some cases is laying off several thousands of state employees, which maybe they wouldn't have had to do and could still furnish the same level of services if they didn't have these federal mandates.

I think in the next two years, or probably even less than that, in 18 months to two years, you are going to start seeing legislators being more vocal towards the federal government, trying to get their case heard on the federal level, saying, "Don't balance the federal budget on our backs, we have problems of our own." We're responsible for a certain level of government, mainly in education, in administration of health care programs, highway systems, and those other things that they have neglected, for example, by holding the highway funds and allowing those funds to go towards balancing the budget.

If the federal government wants to make some reforms, they should do it without making the states shoulder that burden.

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