

Closed Circuit®

Insider report: behind the scene, before the fact

Superlobbyist?

At least five of nine Democrats on House Communications Subcommittee have been paid private visits by FCC Chairman Charles D. Ferris inveighing against Communications Act rewrite; he argues it isn't necessary and the goals can be reached through simple amendments (story page 24). Ferris lobbying—prerogative he justifies because of former status as counsel to Speaker Tip O'Neill (D-Mass.) and before that to former Majority Leader Mike Mansfield—isn't welcomed everywhere on Hill. He's said to give lip service to deregulation as "fashionable," and would go for changes in selected common carrier provisions, but basic position—dovetailing more and more with that of public interest pressure groups—opposes stem-to-stern provisions of Van Deerlin measure and aspects of pending Senate bills that would loosen stranglehold on broadcast services.

Detouring around TV

Much of criticism of Communications Act rewrite last week came from Lionel Van Deerlin's own colleagues (story page 26) but Communications Subcommittee chairman isn't dismayed. He still thinks he can get bill with significant restructuring of commission, common carrier reform and radio deregulation. But he sees writing on wall for television deregulation. From comments at hearing last week, he thinks going ahead with bill's TV provisions will be difficult "if not impossible." Worse, he thinks, TV may wind up with tougher regulation than it has now.

Nobody's baby

Assertion of Senate Communications Subcommittee Chairman Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.) that retransmission consent is properly copyright issue that belongs before Judiciary Committee (page 22) prompts question of whether Judiciary has any interest in it. Answer is no. Staffers for Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), chairman of that committee, are aware of ongoing debate, but Kennedy has expressed no ambitions for legislative proceedings of his own. Nor, apparently, has anyone seeking higher cable copyright fees asked him to.

In House, Representative Robert Kastenmeier (D-Wis.), co-author of copyright legislation that led to present compulsory license, also is staying clear of controversy. Those who want cable to pay higher rates argue that in absence of retransmission consent, someone like Kastenmeier should intervene. His

position, however, is to get involved only if retransmission consent is passed—because it would drastically affect existing law he helped fashion.

New brand

Superstation entrepreneur Ted Turner wants new call sign for his ch. 17 WTCG(TV) Atlanta. He is seeking WTBS, to stand for Turner Broadcasting System. That call was assigned to educational FM on Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus in Cambridge, which relinquished it last month (station took new call, WMBR). Turner paid MIT-associated group \$25,000 for giving up call, will pay another \$25,000 if he is successful in obtaining WTBS from FCC.

Departuresville

What motivated surprise resignation of Larry H. Darby, economist who became chief of FCC's Common Carrier Bureau ("In Brief," page 21)? While he did not publicly assign reason, it follows pattern of other key staff resignations—prompted by interference from chairman's office. Report is Darby wanted to select deputy of his own choosing but that word came down from "Eighth Floor" that this was not to be. He also was disappointed over losing policy debate in AT&T rate matter. Wallace E. Johnson, veteran chief of Broadcast Bureau, elected to take early retirement because of Ferris aides and exclusion from policy meetings. There have been half-dozen other early retirements or resignations because of what's generally regarded as Ferris's effort to rebuild FCC politically and in his own image.

Moving up

Chain of events may lead to elevation of James Broyhill (R-N.C.), co-sponsor of Communications Act rewrite, to ranking Republican seat on full House Commerce Committee. It's expected that Representative John Anderson (R-Ill.), having announced candidacy for President, will resign chairmanship of House Republican Conference. Samuel Devine (R-Ohio), current Commerce ranking Republican, is likely to be elected to that post and then to vacate his seat on Commerce Committee. Broyhill is next in line. Communications Act rewrite proponents think having one of bill's sponsors in top committee position can only help bill's chances.

Broyhill's ascendancy to full committee position will leave Republican spot vacant on Communications Subcommittee. Possible successor: Matthew Rinaldo (R-N.J.).

Ratings

With obvious bias, professional FCC workers regard Charles D. Ferris as least admired chairman among 18 who have served since agency was first established (as Federal Radio Commission) in 1927. Second worst, in consensus of practitioners, broadcasters and veteran FCC staff, where morale is at low ebb, was late George C. McConaughy, Republican, who served from 1954 to 1957.

Most admired chairmen, particularly at staff level, are Rosel H. Hyde and Richard E. Wiley, now in private practice. Both are Republicans; Hyde served twice as chairman during 1946-1969 tenure; "Workaholic" Wiley from 1974 to 1977. But vying with them is late Wayne Coy, Democrat, who served from 1947 until 1952, regarded by many as most efficient and effective chairman, who, as broadcaster, understood vicissitudes of business and competition during less fruitful years but was tough regulator.

Qube squaring

Warner Cable Corp., pioneering its interactive Qube system in Columbus, Ohio, and now moving on to Houston, intends to take Qube wherever it obtains urban franchises. And in case of Boston, where Warner already has greater metropolitan areas built, there's likely to be conversion to Qube even if permission for core city isn't forthcoming. Among other Warner targets: Cincinnati, Minneapolis and Phoenix.

Resuscitated

National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting seems to be in improved financial health since it was brought under Ralph Nader umbrella in October (BROADCASTING, Oct. 16, 1978). It has five full-time paid staffers, up from two last year, plus flock of interns, some of whom are paid. And in past couple of weeks it has been soliciting funds it needs to accept \$10,000 matching grant. Benefactor, reportedly, is Unitarian Veatch Church, Plaindome, N.Y., which has used oil wealth left it by parishoner to fund number of public interest groups—NCCB, United Church of Christ and Media Access Project among them.

Besides contributions and grants, NCCB is hoping research now under way will result in books that will produce additional revenue. Among target subjects: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Public Broadcasting Service, National Association of Broadcasters, BROADCASTING magazine.