New Constitution Won't Be Cure-all

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(Times-Picayune Staff Correspondent)

BATON ROUGE — Before the Constitutional Convention gets too deeply involved in all the facts and figures being assembled and assimilated, its members should be reminded they have a tiger by the tail and it will not turn to butter.

If the public mistrusts its officials and the officials mistrust each other, who can be trusted to do the public’s business?

One of the deep-rooted problems of the current state constitution is that it was put together by clumsy artisans, and that includes the voters who adopted the amendments — as a bulwark against public officials.

Constitutional drafters can put together all the elements of checks and balances they want to, but it will not be worth an unconstitutional act if elected officials are less than men of goodwill. And that’s what it’s all about.

ONE SCHOOL of thought holds that a strong chief executive responsible and responsive to the people is the answer, assuming, of course, that a lot of the purely statutory material in the present constitution can be left to the legislature to handle as gentlemen might. This school holds there is a new day in the Louisiana Legislature and it is now more deserving of confidence than any in recent history.

Each of us has his own evaluation. Mine is a little lower, because the elements of spoilsmanship are just as evident now as they always have been, despite recent efforts to project a better image.

Among those who espouse the strong executive is Edward J. Steimel, director of the Public Affairs Research Council, who has had his days with chief executives. He told a Constitutional Convention committee recently that many of the powers of the governor now are more traditional than constitutional.

Steimel enumerated what he meant. The legislature, he said, is too obedient to the governor in allowing him to meddle with selection of legislative officers and committees, and in allowing him to name legislators to executive branch committees and commissions (Gov. Edwin Edwards did that just a few days ago with a special wetlands project). Steimel also noted the use of interim committees to increase individual legislative salaries, unusually heavy appointive powers granted by statutes the legislature enacts, failure to execute a real long range highway or capital budget plan, and the dependence on the executive branch for legislative information.

THE PAR director hit it squarely on the head when he declared the largest source of gubernatorial power “is our tradition and the tradition of the legislature in looking to the governor as king.”

It is said that you cannot change human nature — and surely nothing the Constitutional Convention does will amend that ancient law.