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Rep. Frances Farenthold

A melancholy rebel

Austin

Courage is not a commodity much in evidence at the Texas State Legislature, it not being an institution that gives many opportunities for display of same.

But one can find there instances of moral courage. Sometimes it takes courage to compromise, to accept too little, too late, because it means the poor will get – not enough, but an eighth of a loaf. There is the kind of courage it takes to resist temptation – there are a lot of temptations around the capitol. And there is the courage of just keeping on.

Frances Farenthold has that kind of courage.

"Sissy is depressive," a friend of hers remarked in fond disparagement. "I've never seen her up, she's always down. Well, hell, no wonder. She's always just come from some fresh defeat. But she always keeps on."

"There are times," said Mrs. Farenthold recently, "when I can't think of a single reason why I do keep on. Like today," she said, wryly surveying the House floor where some fool was droning on about a bill to encourage the thrashing of pecans or prevent the thrashing of pecans or some damn thing about pecans, while no one else listened. "Today I would very much like to be outside enjoying spring."

Mrs. Farenthold hasn't seen much of spring this year. All day, every day; all night, every night; weekdays, weekends and holidays, Frances Farenthold keeps on trying. She is the liberal least likely to be found at Scholz Garten.

Her perpetual "down" generally takes the form of a pained, black humor that sounds as though it's on the verge of petering out entirely. "Did you catch that vote?" she'll inquire in a thin, tired drawl after some outstanding piece of asininity has triumphed on the floor. "And you smarties in the press think we're just a bunch of yo-yo's."

Mrs. Farenthold is the leader of a group of representatives known, with grim, Farentholdian humor, as The Cabal. The Cabal has been responsible for every attempt made in the House to do anything about the involvement of House Speaker Gus Mutscher and two prominent House members, Heatly and Shannon, in the SEC stock fraud scandal. The Cabal has been resoundingly unsuccessful. It is not smart to challenge the speaker, even if he's up to his neck in a nasty scandal. It may be moral, but it's not smart.

There is a school of opinion which holds that Frances Farenthold is not a pessimist, but a realist. Given what she's trying to do, she'd have to be insane to be an optimist. Shucks, all she wants is honest state government; strong, radical action to

(Continued on Page 3)



Photo by Ann Mundy

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Cissy Farenthold . . .

(Continued from Page 1)

protect the environment; equal justice for *chicanos* and blacks, and a few other goodies.

Many members of the opposition keep their sanity by getting madder than hell every now and then and letting it all hang out in a splendid temper tantrum. Mrs. Farenthold, who is singularly devoid of temper, just gets sadder and sadder.

Frances Farenthold, lady rebel, came to the House four years ago with impeccable Establishment credentials. She comes from a prominent Corpus Christi family. Her grandfather, Judge E. D. Tarlton served first as a justice on the Ft. Worth Court of Civil Appeals and later on the Commission of Appeals, which was merged with the State Supreme Court. Her father, Dudley Tarlton, was a well-known Corpus Christ lawyer.

Mrs. Farenthold, who is 44, is a graduate of the prestigious and snobby Hockaday School, Vassar College (even more prestigious and snobby) and the University of Texas Law School. In 1950 she married George Farenthold, a Belgian by birth – a U.S. citizen since 1940, who is in the shipping business. Farenthold, after umpteen years of living in America, retains a gorgeously sexy sort of Maurice Chevalier accent. He disagrees strongly with his wife's political views, but limits himself to urging her to do something for his pet cause – a bill that would permit private citizens to import casks of wine from Europe for their own use without a liquor license. Mrs. Farenthold has yet to oblige her husband on that one.

Their children are Tarlton, 19, a legislative aide and student at UT; George, Jr., 18, also a legislative aide and UT student; Emilie, 16, who is completing six months of study in France, and James. 15, a student at St. Stephen's School in Austin. Their son Vincent, Jimmy's twin, died two weeks before his fourth birthday: all the children suffer from a form of hemophilia and Vincent died after an accident at home. Mrs. Farenthold speaks of his death with enough ease so that her listener is not uncomfortable, but will speak of it only briefly – one senses great hurt still there. Her first effort at political organizing was the result of Vincent's death: she tried to organize the mothers of the students at Jimmy's school to improve the safety conditions of the playground there.

The Farenthold home in Corpus Christi might best be described as a slightly shabby mansion. It's a huge, old pile of a place overlooking Corpus Christi Bay, furnished half in a distinctly European elegance and half in comfortable-sloppy. The ambience is that of a Marx Brothers movie: strange people keep popping out of odd rooms to be explained with a blithe, "Oh that's the man from Houston. He came to do his laundry here."

An impromptu gathering at the Farenthold home one night shortly after Hurricane Celia included one millionaire, one *chicano* aide to former Sen. Ralph Yarborough, one journalist, the long-haired boyfriend of Emilie, assorted Farentholds, Mrs. Farenthold's brother Dudley who flies helicopters and two businessmen, the reason for whose presence was never figured out by anyone.

Mrs. Farenthold is an expert at what Alvin Toffler would call "shifting modules" – a pastime known to most of us as coping. She shifts easily from dealing with the various forms of teenage rebellion evidenced by her younger children to another generation gap presented by her conservative, but extremely lively mother to the problems of her capable cook, Madeleine Stone, to pollution in Corpus Christi Bay to disaster relief to the *chicano* question to reform in state government and back to why the freezer is refusing to make ice cubes.

Mrs. Farenthold continued practicing law off and on until she went back to it full time in 1964. From 1965 to 1967 she served as director of Legal Aid in Nueces County.

"It was a soul-searing experience," she recalls. "I don't think I'd have ever gone into politics except for that. I've lived in Corpus Christi all my life but I saw and became aware of things I just hadn't known about until I got that position. From the outside. one tends to think, 'Well, we've got institutions to take care of these problems – there's a hospital and a welfare program and all these programs to solve people's problems.' It's not until you get on the inside that you realize – it's just not enough. The programs aren't working.

"I'd say 90% of my clients (at Legal Aid) had welfare-related problems. I realized that it wasn't the case workers causing the problems, it was the policies up here [in Austin]."

In a tone of wry exhaustion she concluded, "I really thought when I came up here, I would be able to involve myself in welfare reform."

The beginnings of her political career were not auspicious. A friend called her and asked her to run for the Legislature at 7 p.m. the night before filing closed. She consulted her husband and her cousin Dudley Dougherty, called the friend back two hours later and said she'd do it.

"It was an amateur's campaign – all the way," she said. "I did have some good professional advice, but I didn't follow it. They kept telling us, 'You can't do this' and 'You've got to do that.' I refused to have billboards. My advisers almost died, but I thought, well, if I'm going to come down on business for using them, I can't do it myself. All my advisers were male, but most of my campaign workers were women, bless them, and we won."

She faced two opponents in the Democratic primary; beat one the first time around and the second on a run-off and then went on to defeat incumbent Republican Chuck Scoggins, who was considered the minority leader of the House.

"I went over with the ticket," she said. "It was November, 1968, and I don't fool myself." She was the only member of the Corpus Christi delegation to face opposition in the last campaign and handily defeated two opponents, one in the primary and one in the general election, with no help from a national ticket.

Mrs. Farenthold began her career in the Legislature with a move that would have made General Custer look good by comparison. The question was a resolution inviting former President Lyndon Johnson to address the House, which was fine with Mrs. Farenthold. But the resolution also included a commendation of Johnson's administration.

"By then, even I was questioning the Vietnam war," said Mrs. Farenthold, who makes no claim to having been an early, prescient activist. "I paced the floor for an hour on that and finally voted against it." The vote was 149 to 1.

Her next Waterloo, which eventually became a Pyrrhic victory, was the Sadler resolution. Former Land Commissioner Jerry Sadler appeared before the House Governmental Affairs and Efficiency Committee, of which Mrs. Farenthold is a member. The committee asked to see the contract by which Sadler had arranged for the salvage of the sunken Spanish treasures. After Sadler had tooled the committee around for a bit, he finally showed them an unsigned contract which he later repudiated. He then proceeded to tool the committee around on the question of showing them what treasures had been recovered and gratuitously capped off his performance by trying to strangle a committee member, Rep. Jake Johnson. Mrs. Farenthold felt that was no way for a legislative committee to be treated by a state official and introduced a motion to censure Sadler.

"No one wanted me to do it," she recalled. "The censure first failed on a procedural point." It was sent to the Rules Committee, from whence it emerged as a reprimand rather than a censure. The question was scheduled to be called at 12:01 a.m. during a session that ended at midnight. Mrs. Farenthold determined to reintroduce the reprimand next morning, the first day of the second call session, again against the advice of all concerned.

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"When we took the vote, I thought, I'd lost," she said. "But then someone told me to ask for a verification." It turned out that numerous members of that "honorable body" had punched the voting buttons of members who weren't there at all. The reprimand resolution passed.

"The Sadler censure was kindergarten compared to what we're going through now," she said, referring to her resolution to get a bi-cameral committee to investigate just how House bills 72-73 (the "Frank Sharp bills" that would have removed state banks from FDIC regulation) got roller-skated through the last session.

One gets the impression that Mrs. Farenthold secretly thinks she is not in a state legislature at all; she thinks she's fallen through the looking glass and arrived in Kafkaland.

"I couldn't understand why we couldn't get the antiquities bill out of committee," she said of her one victory of last session. "I couldn't get an appointment with the speaker during the regular session to ask him about it. I coudn't get an appointment with the governor. I finally did have a telephone conversation with the attorney general and he told me he represented the land commissioner. So after the session was over we kept on and we got the historical societies and such to push for it and we came back with it in the special session and it passed – unanimously!"

Mrs. Farenthold claims one other victory. She got a bill through that paid the travel expenses of the late Judge Norvell for his trip to Corpus Christi to sit in on an excessively complicated water case.

Mrs. Farenthold's interest in ecology grew as she watched the slow ruination of her beloved and beautiful Corpus Christi Bay. She has spent endless days, hours and weeks, touring with Parks and Wildlife officials, sitting in Railroad Commission hearings, phoning and trying to make sense out of the maze of irresponsibility charged with protecting the bay.

She recounts the following history with pained incredulity. "Our ship channel in Corpus Christi is an ecological wasteland. Some federal anti-pollution officials had come down for an inspection tour and after they saw the Houston channel they were brought to Corpus Christi and taken out on a boat tour of our channel. Well, that excursion boat got only to the first turning basin and then it turned right around and chugged back. A state official said, 'Whew, it really got us off the hook to show them the Corpus Christi channel after Houston.'

"It's such an incredible self-perpetuating myth. Some Water Quality official has just commended Corpus Christi for its 'clean channel.' " This 'clean channel' stuff just kills me."

As a politican, Mrs. Farenthold leaves something to be desired. Some poor soul is eternally calling her for help, and she spends enormous amounts of time on the phone trying to straighten out their problems (one reason why her contingency expenditures are among the highest in the House, along with her research expenses.) But she is given to mourning ineffectually over those constituents whom she offends. One Corpus Christi couple appeared in Austin to testify for a bill which Mrs. Farenthold opposed. As they left, with huffy looks in Mrs. Farenthold's direction, she said, "Oh dear. They're from my district and I didn't even say hello. I should have done that." But she didn't.

Longtime liberal observers of the Legislature have been looking for a liberal leader in the House of Representatives ever since Bob Eckhardt left. The theory is that the liberal minority (the Dirty Thirty is actually composed of about 19 liberals, some obstreperous Republicans and a few black and *chicano* legislators) can be effective only with a skilled parliamentarian as leader. Dugger once observed, "When Eckhardt was in the House, the liberals could sometimes save the day. They never saved the week, but sometimes they saved the day." Since Eckhardt left, there has been little leadership from the liberals. Some think Frances Farenthold can provide that leadership. And others don't.

"Oh. Sissy," said one shrewd state official in the tone of tepid dismissal reserved by smart operators for hopelessly negligible good causes, such as the SPCA and Frances Farenthold.

"But she isn't a leader," complained a card-carrying member of the Dirty Thirty. "Christ, she's never even talked to me except to say 'Hi' in the aisle and I voted for her damn resolution. Talk about a communications gap."

"I wish she'd go home and leave me in peace," mourned another liberal. "Hadna been for Sissy, man, I could have cut such deals. I could've been on speaking terms with the speaker and all the other biggies. I could have voted with the troglodytes and my constituents would love. me. But then up comes Sissy and I have to vote with her because, dammit, she's right. I wish she'd go home."

"Her personality turns too many people off," said one representative flatly. "She just irritates them."

It's difficult to assess how much of the antipathy to Mrs. Farenthold is attributable to her own failings and how much is simply a reflection of the very real sexism in the House. While most members of The Cabal have no hesitation about following a woman, it gives the group an added disadvantage as far as the rest of the House is concerned. Bad enough to be a pitiful minority, double bad to be a pitiful *liberal* minority, but triple opprobrium to be a pitiful, liberal minority led by a *female*. Her leadership makes the group easier to dismiss.

Still, yet, but, however. Frances Farenthold *was* the only member with the guts to stand up and offer a strong investigative resolution, who made the fight, who did the work, who keeps on trying. The few other potential leaders in the liberal bloc have plans to go elsewhere soon; for example, John Hannah, a moderate, has his eye on Charlie Wilson's presumably-soon-to-be-vacated senate seat (Charlie Wilson has his eye on a new congressional seat.) Mrs. Farenthold is as likely to become the next liberal leader in the House by default as by any other method.

But that still leaves a more serious question about whether House liberals at this time should have a leader who is recognized primarily for her "moral purity". The real problem with Mrs. Farenthold's potential leadership of the House liberal bloc is that she seems to be in the grand, old tradition of Texas kamikaze liberalism. It is probable that she no more deserves that label than Bobby Kennedy deserved the "ruthless" label that was hung on him to the end of his life. But at a time when the conservative Establishment has achieved a new nadir in public esteem, it would seem that the liberal minority might at last be in a position to form an effective coalition with moderates and moderate conservatives. The current boomlet for Price Daniel, Jr., a moderate conservative, for the speakership, backed by several moderate/liberals, may be an indication of such a developing coalition.

The unique political orientation of Mrs. Farenthold is that she would cheer for, rather than deplore, such a coalition. One of the more depressing realities of the House is that its far-left polarity consists of uncompromising kamikaze liberals. Mrs. Farenthold has had occasion recently to echo the famous perfunctory disclaimer: "I have no pride of authorship. I am not wedded to this version." That slogan can be applied not only to her investigative bill, but to her political outlook as well. She said recently, "My real hope lies with the young people." And she named several young men who are clearly destined to be elected to the House (with many a slip, and all that). "I do not think they can be corrupted," she said.

But one of the first lessons Franced Farenthold is able to offer those young people is that compromise is not a pejorative word. One does not expect that Frances Farenthold will compromise her own beliefs: one expects only that she will understand and encourage those who do compromise for good cause. One also expects of her – more than of the big, beefy men with twice her stamina, more than of the complacent members with "safe" districts, more than of the kamikaze liberals–that she will keep on trying. M.I.

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