

The Salt Lake Tribune

Ethics Committee Clears Mel Brown; Unanimous vote favors outgoing House speaker; Mel Brown Cleared By House Ethics Committee

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The Utah House Ethics Committee on Wednesday cleared outgoing Speaker **Mel Brown** of wrongdoing. The committee's four Republicans and four Democrats unanimously voted to dismiss the complaint against the Legislature's most powerful member. The panel had met for two days behind closed doors to probe allegations that the leader discussed future job prospects with a US West lobbyist.

Brown, seeking exoneration, joined the House Republican majority and Democratic minority leaders in filing the complaint Dec. 16. He said he was gratified with the outcome.

"These kind of things are a burden you carry around no matter what happens," Brown said. "Tonight that burden has been lifted and we're ready to go on and do the best we can to serve the citizens of the state of Utah."

News reports about the allegations sunk Brown's plans to seek an unprecedented third term as speaker. But he has said he intends to continue serving among the rank-and-file representatives.

The Ethics Committee concluded that no provision in the Legislature's official code of conduct was violated after hearing from four witnesses about an Oct. 16 meeting between Brown and US West lobbyist Rob Jolley at a Holladay restaurant.

The two engaged in a "personal conversation" about Brown's marital problems, members determined.

"Speaker Brown did not solicit or accept any job offer or contract of employment" from Jolley on behalf of US West or any other employer, the committee concluded.

Ethics Chairman David Ure, R-Kamas, described the two-day inquiry as an "inner torment."

“You hear things that you don't want to hear,” he explained. “Any time you get into people's personal lives, it gets tough.”

In the end, he said, “the process worked. We felt like we dug as deep as we could go in every avenue we could.”

The panel evidently restricted its investigation into whether Brown actively negotiated with Jolley over specific jobs.

Jolley has acknowledged he talked with Brown about a future job at US West or being a lobbyist for the company, but he has said he had no authority to make a job offer. US West officials also have said Jolley lacked such authority.

Jolley has repeatedly described the conversation as personal, while Brown has insisted it focused on telecommunications issues that might come up in the 1999 Legislature.

The ethics panel did not call any representatives of US West, even though Jolley and two young men who overheard the conversation all have said the name of the company's president, Sol Trujillo, came up during the restaurant conversation.

Former legislative intern Lynn Allison, 25, testified in the closed hearing Wednesday, as did his roommate, Mike Dray, 20. Allison and Dray said they were eating lunch at a restaurant when they overheard a conversation between Brown and Jolley.

Allison previously has told The Tribune that he recalled Brown asking Jolley what Trujillo might think if Brown's marital difficulties became public and he lost his position as speaker. He also said Jolley urged Brown not to file for divorce to avoid public controversy, protect his position and preserve his employment prospects.

Allison recalled Jolley saying, “Sol has plans for you when you are done, that there's a place for you.”

Following the investigation, Ure and co-chairwoman Mary Carlson said the committee did not need to interview anyone from US West.

Carlson said the committee did not pursue that line of inquiry because it was not relevant.

“The complaint specified only that particular relationship” between Jolley and Brown, she said. “We deal with the complaint that we're given.”

The complaint seeks a review of allegations that Brown had an “improper relationship with US West, a company which is directly and significantly affected by the acts of the Utah Legislature.”

US West has said it expects to do \$520 million in business in Utah

this year. Brown is being replaced by Speaker-elect Marty Stephens, who has talked of the need for new guidelines governing the sometimes ``cozy'' relationships between lobbyists and lawmakers.

But Brown insists his own ordeal does not suggest tighter rules.

``The Legislature as a body is a political and social process," Brown said. ``If you can't interact with people, you can't make laws."

Brown lauded the committee of his peers, saying they came to a just conclusion.

``The citizens need to know that the process has been well served and that nothing improper was done."

Four of the eight members received campaign contributions from US West or competing companies and one, Rep. Peter Knudson, accepted \$575 in free political consulting from Jolley's firm to his 1998 campaign.

None of the panelists declared a conflict of interest.

Two attorneys who accompanied Brown hailed the complaint's dismissal and damned the news media -- particularly The Salt Lake Tribune.

Attorney Jim **Bradshaw** condemned the newspaper for basing reports on pieces of conversation overheard by Allison.

``The face of leadership in the Utah House of Representatives has been changed based upon an accusation of a fresh-faced intern with no substantiation and a body of evidence which contradicted him," **Bradshaw** said.

Attorney Ken Brown said the only abuse of power in the case was on the part of the news media.

``The Tribune has ruined a good man's reputation," Brown fumed. He denounced the newspaper's reports as ``outrageous" and ``misinformation."

Brown, **Mel Brown's** cousin, said the lawmaker ``will leave his options open" in regard to a possible lawsuit.

Tribune editor James E. Shelledy said the newspaper stood by its reporting in the matter and questioned the fairness of the ethics review.

``The pre-ordained mission of that committee was to cover **Mel Brown's** and their own rear ends," Shelledy said.

Allison and Dray said they felt they were treated well by the

committee.

``With the exception of Rep. [Margaret] Dayton, I was treated fairly by the committee and they acted impartially.,'' said Allison.

``It went fine,'' said Dray. ``It seemed like they listened to what I had to say, and they took my answers seriously.''

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