

. . . And other sundry vices

Mayor Bilandic has reacted to stories about another sort of municipal corruption—the bribery of city inspectors and other officials—by introducing a number of ordinances in the City Council. The mayor was prodded into action largely by the Chicago Sun-Times' articles about the parade of people on the take that marched through the Mirage tavern.

The ordinances would make it a civil offense, prosecutable by the corporation counsel, to offer a city worker a bribe. They would also prohibit anyone convicted of trying to bribe a government employe from bidding on city contracts for a period of three years. These proposals are designed to reinforce the mayor's proposed Office of Professional Review, which would function as an internal civic watchdog agency.

Chicago is entering into a transition period. The old order, the old way of doing things, if it is not exactly passing away, at least is going through an important transformation. In such moments of change, misconduct that may once have been taken for granted—or taken care of within the network of political power—will begin to come to light and to be called into question. Petty bribery is one element of this old scheme of things. The sweetheart contract with political cronies is another. There are many more.

The advantages of moving away from these old ways are obvious. A political mechanism that depends on illegality can hardly be thought to work at all.

Yet there are perils as well. Without some orderly way of dealing with charges of misconduct, even of anticipating and rooting them out, the process of transition can become political hurly-burly in which the city suffers more than it gains.

Mayor Bilandic's proposals are instant reactions to an immediate crisis. They have some merit, but they leave many questions unanswered.

Will the Office of Professional Review have the independence to move into areas where investigation can generate political heat? Would a completely independent review board be better, or would it run the risk of becoming irresponsible? If the City Council retains the authority to confirm appointees to the office, will people of stature be attracted to the job? Can any anticorruption device work if it does not interact closely with prosecutors, state and federal?

Finally, it is not at all clear that bribery should be the sole focus of attention. And it is even less clear that the problem of bribery stems from weakness in the current laws as written. The failure has rather been a lack of will to enforce current laws.

The mayor and the City Council should act carefully in setting up new institutions to deal with corruption. They should give the alternatives a thorough public hearing. What they invent will have to serve the city well at a critical time in its history.