

MY VIEW one reader's opinion

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Mr. Wentz, of Mechanicsburg, who made a 31-hour speech on corruption atop the State Capitol steps in 1978, is pursuing a master's degree at the University of Pennsylvania and a law degree at George Washington University.

Penrose statue challenges us

RECENTLY, a question of "political aestheticism" provoked comment in Harrisburg. Rep. Mark Cohen, D-Phila., wanted the statue of former Republican boss Boies Penrose removed from its Third and Walnut Streets perch.

"Anybody who knows who he is knows what a crook he was," noted Cohen of Penrose.

In editorial response, the Patriot and Evening News argued: "We say let standing statues stand. It's part of the charm of Capitol Hill and Harrisburg."

The flavor of such a remark, of course, is debatable but its efficacy is not; to remove the Penrose statue for its suggestion of corruption, would be to demolish as well the entire Pennsylvania Capitol building which, following its dedication in 1906, was labeled a "Palatial Monument of Fraud." Certainly the cost suggested by an onslaught of bulldozers and wrecking balls is prohibitive.

One suspects, however, that the issue here addressed is not so much one of monuments and statues as one of knowledge and direction. Most Pennsylvanians take no more notice of Penrose than they do of statuary in any public facility. Perhaps, too, few blinked when Congressman Raymond Lederer, D-Pa., was re-elected to office while under indictment on Abscam-related charges. Or when Congressman Daniel Flood, D-Pa., though indicted for perjury, conspiracy and bribery, successfully sought re-election to office and was "vigorously applauded" by a crowd of some 500 supporters who gathered to offer him the Lion's Club "Citizen of the Year" award.

Certainly the problem of corruption in Pennsylvania has received attention and much has been accomplished in the four years since Gov. Dick Thornburgh took office. A "Public Integrity" unit in the Justice Department has helped to enforce tough conflict-of-interest standards. The State Ethics Commission has

weathered attempts to weaken the ethics act. And sunset legislation, requiring the periodic review of unnecessary and inefficient state agencies, was passed in 1981 after a six-year struggle.

Other "reforms" have met a less fortunate fate. Pennsylvania's lobbying disclosure law remains riddled with loopholes, so much so that in the first six months of 1981 only 20 of 831 registered lobbyists reported spending any money at all to influence legislation. Government agencies have avoided the state Sunshine Law by meeting in secret to discuss public business and then opening doors only for relatively meaningless voting sessions. Bills to address questions of campaign finance and disclosure remain forever stalled in committee.

Ultimately, however, it is the Pennsylvania electorate which more than legislation will determine the future of this Commonwealth. Ours is a representative government. We fought for it. We won it. But do we have it? From 1960 to 1970, Pennsylvania turnout in presidential elections fell from 63 percent to 61 percent, and in 1980 voter response was but 53 percent. In contrast, in West Germany, a country with a strikingly low incidence of corruption, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt was re-elected in 1980 with nearly 90 percent of all eligible Germans voting.

Boies Penrose should not fall. He stands with hand in pocket (or was it the public till?) as a poignant reminder of much that is at once both disappointing and great about this land. History records that Pennsylvanians on occasion have allowed their public affairs to be conducted in a slovenly and corrupt fashion which would not be tolerated in any field in which they felt personally concerned. Yet that we, as a people, have the democratic tools with which to fight for the improvement of mankind's predicament is a blessing.