

Watchdog makes big waves with small resources

By [Peggy Fikac](#) August 9, 2015

AUSTIN — Attorney General Ken Paxton and former Gov. Rick Perry may have a long legal slog ahead as they battle their indictments.

But Craig McDonald, whose watchdog group filed the criminal complaints that spurred both cases, isn't saying where he thinks their road should end. The job he sees for himself with regard to their cases was all but over when the indictments were delivered.

McDonald said he'll speak up if the cases look as if they are being "sidetracked unfairly." But he expressed no opinion about whether either Republican should get prison time, because he doesn't see that as part of his task.

"We've done our job unless something else comes up. It's not our job to mete out punishment," said McDonald, director of Texans for Public Justice. "To see them held accountable is what we want. How that accountability gets defined is beyond us."

Accountability is McDonald's watchword. With a slim staff including research director Andrew Wheat and an annual budget of \$250,000, his organization keeps tabs on money in politics, takes on big-name Texas Republicans and is slammed by them as a matter of course.

The group since its 1997 inception has filed about 22 legal actions against individuals and political action committees, ranging from criminal complaints to lawsuits to Texas Ethics Commission complaints.

One, against a Democratic State Board of Education member, was dismissed. Another resulted in a conviction against Republican former U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay that was overturned years later by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, long after DeLay had stepped down from his powerful post.

Three are pending, and the rest have resulted in indictments, judgments or fines, McDonald said. That includes the case against Perry on accusations of abusing his veto power. One of two charges against Perry has been tossed by an intermediate appellate court in pretrial maneuvering, an action that's expected to be appealed further.

Only a few of the cases brought by McDonald's group have targeted Democrats, even though the nonprofit is billed as nonpartisan. He said that's because Republicans hold sway in statewide office.

"One of my defenses is the Willie Sutton defense," said McDonald, referring to the robber credited with saying he stole from banks "because that's where the money is."

“That’s where the corruption is. They’re all in charge,” he said. “There hasn’t been a Democrat elected statewide since we started this operation.”

The Sutton defense gets a cold shoulder from critics.

“I think it’s clearly an arm of the Democrat Party in Texas. They may have a small budget. They may not be that well-organized. But it seems to me that they are very much a part of their (Democrats’) overall strategy,” said GOP consultant Matt Mackowiak, pointing to a donation to the group from an entity with ties to Democratic benefactor George Soros. “To pretend like you are just these sort of do-gooders trying to keep the system aboveboard, I think, is baloney.”

Democratic consultant Harold Cook said he doesn’t know if he’s even met McDonald but added, “It’s kind of hard to ignore him when most of his complaints are seen by law enforcement as having plenty of merit.”

Cook offered a variation of Sutton defense to explain the Republicans in the watchdog’s sights. “You just hunt where the ducks are,” he said.

McDonald, a former director of the Ralph Nader-founded Public Citizen who started out as a community organizer, acknowledged that just because his group is nonpartisan doesn’t mean it lacks a point of view.

“We are for transparency. We think too few people control too much political power in Texas. When we see things that touch on that, we think it’s our job to hold people accountable,” he said.

For example, McDonald said his group pursued the complaint against Paxton even though alleged securities fraud “wasn’t totally up our alley” because “no one else picked up the ball,” including Democrats and Paxton’s GOP primary opposition in last year’s race for attorney general.

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