

STATE OF NEW YORK
COMMISSION ON JUDICIAL CONDUCT

----- X
In the Matter :
- of - :
HELEN BURNHAM, :
a Justice of the Town Court :
of Salina, Onondaga County. :
----- X

DETERMINATION

STATE COMMISSION ON
JUDICIAL CONDUCT

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PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

This Determination of the State Commission on Judicial Conduct (hereinafter the "Commission") is submitted in accordance with Article VI, Section 22, of the Constitution of the State of New York, and Article 2-A of the Judiciary Law as amended effective April 1, 1978, (hereinafter "amended Judiciary Law"), for transmittal by the Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals to the Honorable Helen Burnham (hereinafter "respondent").

Respondent is a justice of the Town Court of Salina in Onondaga County. She is not an attorney. She first took office on June 7, 1971. Her current term of office expires on December 31, 1981.

The investigation in this matter was commenced on January 26, 1977, by the former State Commission on Judicial Conduct (hereinafter "former Commission"), pursuant to Section 43, subdivision 2, of the Judiciary Law then in effect (hereinafter "former Judiciary Law"). In the course of its investigation, the former Commission discovered three instances in which respondent made ex parte requests of other judges for favorable dispositions for defendants in traffic cases and seven instances

in which respondent granted favorable dispositions to defendants in traffic cases pursuant to requests from third parties.

Pursuant to Section 43, subdivision 5, of the former Judiciary Law, the former Commission determined that cause existed to conduct a hearing. On January 9, 1978, respondent was served with a Notice of Hearing and a Formal Written Complaint, copies of which are hereto attached. In her Answer, which was in the form of a letter dated February 2, 1978, a copy of which is hereto attached, respondent admitted all the factual allegations in the Formal Written Complaint and waived her right to a hearing.

Pursuant to Section 43, subdivision 7, of the former Judiciary Law, on March 13, 1978, the former Commission forwarded its Determination of public censure to the Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals, for transmittal by him to respondent. In a letter to the Commission dated March 16, 1978, the Chief Judge stated that it would be improper to transmit the Determination to the respondent, inasmuch as the pertinent provisions of the former Judiciary Law would be in effect only through March 31, 1978.* Consequently, the Determination was not transmitted to respondent.

Section 48 of the amended Judiciary Law provides for the transfer to the Commission and continuance of all matters left pending by the former Commission and for which Courts on the Judiciary had not been convened, as of April 1, 1978.

*The former Judiciary Law provided that a respondent seeking review of a Determination filed by the former Commission could request the convening of a Court on the Judiciary for this purpose within 30 days of receipt of the Determination. The amended Judiciary Law provides that no new Court on the Judiciary could be convened on or after April 1, 1978. Thus, respondent's 30-day privilege to request convening of a Court on the Judiciary would have extended beyond April 1, 1978, the date after which no new Court could have been convened.

This Determination, with findings of fact and conclusions of law as set forth below, is filed by the Commission in accordance with the provisions in Section 44, subdivision 7, of the amended Judiciary Law, for transmittal by the Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals to respondent.

FINDINGS OF FACT

On November 29, 1972, respondent sent a letter on official court stationery to Judge Joseph Henderson of the Town Court of Parish, on behalf of the defendant, who was charged with speeding, in People v. Darrell W. Weston, a case then pending before Judge Henderson. Respondent referred in her letter to a prior telephone conversation she had held with Judge Henderson regarding the Weston case, and she enclosed a check for \$20.00 in payment of a fine to be imposed by Judge Henderson on the defendant for the reduced charge of failure to keep right.

On April 11, 1973, respondent sent a letter on official court stationery to Judge James Jerome of the Town Court of Geddes, requesting favorable treatment for the defendant, who was charged with driving a vehicle without a valid certificate of inspection, in People v. Ludwig Steingerwald, a case then pending before Judge Jerome.

On April 23, 1974, respondent sent a letter on official court stationery to Judge Thomas O'Connell of the Town Court of Weedsport, on behalf of the defendant, who was charged with speeding, in People v. Peter A. Weitzman, a case then pending before Judge O'Connell. Respondent referred in her letter to a prior telephone conversation she had held with Judge O'Connell

regarding the Weitzman case, and she enclosed a check for \$50.00 in payment of a fine to be imposed by Judge O'Connell on the defendant for the reduced charge of failure to keep right.

On February 26, 1975, respondent imposed an unconditional discharge on a parking violation in People v. Dick Barnello as a result of a letter she received on behalf of the defendant from Clifford Hart, the Salina Town Supervisor, or someone at Mr. Hart's request.

On May 8, 1975, respondent reduced a charge of speeding to failure to keep right in People v. Richard J. Chisholm as a result of a letter she received on behalf of the defendant from Clifford Hart, the Salina Town Supervisor.

On August 5, 1975, respondent reduced a charge of failure to obey a traffic control device to illegal parking in People v. Michael A. Gentile as a result of a letter she received on behalf of the defendant from Clifford Hart, the Salina Town Supervisor.

On August 20, 1975, respondent reduced a charge of making an unsafe lane change to driving with an inadequate muffler in People v. Jeffrey Rheinhart as a result of a letter she received on behalf of the defendant from Judge Joseph Henderson of the Town Court of Parish.

On August 27, 1975, respondent reduced a charge of passing a red light to driving with unsafe tires in People v. Joseph Riccelli as a result of a letter she received on behalf of the defendant from Clifford Hart, the Salina Town Supervisor.

On December 19, 1975, respondent reduced a charge of speeding to driving a vehicle without a horn in People v. Paul

Kelly, Jr. as a result of a letter she received on behalf of the defendant from Judge Charles Crommie of the Town Court of Catskill.

On July 7, 1976, respondent reduced a charge of avoiding a traffic control device to driving with an inadequate muffler in People v. Florence Lamica as a result of a letter she received on behalf of the defendant from Mary Lessaongang, clerk of the Town Court of Van Buren.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

It is improper for a judge to seek to persuade another judge, on the basis of personal or other special influence, to alter or dismiss a traffic ticket for reasons that have nothing to do with the circumstances of the case. A judge who accedes to such a request is guilty of favoritism as is the judge who made the request.

By making ex parte requests of other judges for favorable dispositions for defendants in traffic cases and by granting favorable dispositions to defendants in traffic cases at the request of third parties, respondent was in violation of Sections 33.1, 33.2, 33.3(a)(1) and 33.3(a)(4) of the Rules Governing Judicial Conduct of the Administrative Board of the Judicial Conference, and Canons 1, 2 and 3(A) of the Code of Judicial Conduct, which read in part as follows:

Every judge...shall himself observe, high standards of conduct so that the integrity and independence of the judiciary may be preserved. [Section 33.1]

A judge shall respect and comply with the law and shall conduct himself at all times in a manner that promotes public confi-

dence in the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary. [Section 33.2(a)]

No judge shall allow his family, social or other relationships to influence his judicial conduct or judgment. [Section 33.2(b)]

No judge...shall convey or permit others to convey the impression that they are in a special position to influence him.... [Section 33.2(c)]

A judge shall be faithful to the law and maintain professional competence in it.... [Section 33.3(a) (1)]

A judge shall...except as authorized by law, neither initiate nor consider ex parte or other communications concerning a pending or impending proceedings.... [Section 33.3(a)(4)]

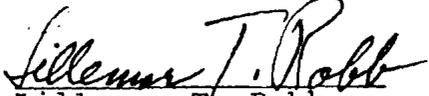
Courts in this state and other jurisdictions have found that favoritism is serious judicial misconduct and that ticket-fixing (similar if not identical to that activity of respondent) is a form of favoritism.

In Matter of Byrne, N.Y.L.J. April 20, 1978, vol. 179, p.5 (Ct. on the Judiciary), the Court on the Judiciary declared that a "judicial officer who accords or requests special treatment or favoritism to a defendant in his court or another judge's court is guilty of malum in se misconduct constituting cause for discipline." In that case, ticket-fixing was equated with favoritism which the court stated was "wrong and has always been wrong." Id.

DETERMINATION

By reason of the foregoing, in accordance with Article VI, Section 22, of the Constitution of the State of New York, and

Section 44, subdivision 7, of the amended Judiciary Law, the State Commission on Judicial Conduct has determined that respondent should be publicly censured.


Lillemor T. Robb
Chairwoman

Dated: New York, New York
December 13, 1978

APPEARANCES:

Bruce O. Jacobs for Respondent

Gerald Stern (Lester C. Goodchild, Of Counsel) for the Commission