

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Democrats vie for committee control

by Barbara Dreyfuss

Mainstream Democrats won some significant victories during the first two days of the House Democratic Caucus meeting Dec. 8 and 9, which chose the House leadership and a key committee chairman. In a major defeat for House Speaker Tip O'Neill, Jim Jones, a moderate from Oklahoma, won the chairmanship of the important House Budget Committee. Jones defeated one of O'Neill's closest long-time allies, David Obey of Wisconsin, an architect of the early-1970s organizational reforms of the House. These were the reforms that broke the power of constituency-oriented senior congressmen.

The House Democratic Caucus will now be headed by Gillis Long of Louisiana. Long's main opponent for the post was Charles Rose, a North Carolina liberal who founded the Congressional Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse, which tries to shape the legislative agenda of Congress, is run by the Club of Rome, initiators of the "limits to growth" doctrine.

While control of these posts can aid the efforts of a number of mainstream Democrats to forge a bipartisan coalition that can implement economic recovery, Speaker O'Neill remains a powerful obstacle to such efforts.

O'Neill's declaration of war against the Republicans and moderate Democrats caused an uproar in the House. Texas Republican Bill Archer began talking to both Republicans and Democrats about ousting O'Neill from the Speaker's post. Only 26 Democrats need vote with the GOP when the full House appoints the Speaker in order for O'Neill to be replaced.

Various conservative and moderate Democratic groupings, including the Conservative Forum headed by Rep. Stenholm of Texas, have met with O'Neill to demand a greater role for mainstream Democrats in House activities. O'Neill was forced to retreat on his threat to pack four committees—Budget, Appropriations, Ways and Means, and Rules—and during the caucus meeting he agreed to stack only Rules and Ways and Means with twice as many Democrats as Republicans.

Control of the Rules Committee, however, gives him significant control over bills that come to the House floor, and Ways and Means oversees critical tax legislation. O'Neill, as of this writing, is also trying to force the caucus to accept a rules change that will allow a committee to keep legislation bottled up unless two thirds of the

representatives vote to bring it to the floor.

O'Neill also conceded three of the eight slots he fills on the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee to conservative congressmen: Tom Bevill of Alabama, Bo Ginn of Georgia, and Wes Watkins of Oklahoma. O'Neill retains control of the body, which appoints members to other committee.

O'Neill will be aided in his efforts to control congressmen by the House whip, who ensures passage of the leadership's legislative agenda. At the Democratic Caucus meeting, the Speaker appointed Rep. Tom Foley of Washington as whip. Foley, a member of the Trilateral Commission, is as determined as O'Neill to turn the House into a parliamentary machine. At a meeting sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. on Dec. 8, Foley told the audience that the reforms of Congress have gone too far, and paralyzed action. Fortunately, he concluded, "in a sense, the Speaker now has more powers than ever before," and O'Neill, he emphasized, will use them.

Tip's economic mentor

Tip O'Neill's office reports that Tip's chief adviser on economics is Walter Heller, former chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers under Kennedy and Johnson. "When he talks about 'my economists' he means Heller," declared a writer well-versed on Tip's activities.

Walter Heller not only supports the policies of Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, which are destroying the economic viability of America, but complains that they do not go far enough. Heller was trained in the late 1930s by Milton Friedman, whose austerity proposals have already destroyed the economies of Israel and Chile.

He made his economic programs plain to a reporter this week. "You have to have not just fiscal and monetary discipline, but it must be coupled with wage and price restraints. . . . You need these restraints to enable the downward pressure you exert on the economy through tight money and restructuring fiscal policy to help the economy. . . . When you run the Federal Reserve policy in restraint and budget restraint, it is not necessarily sufficient. You have to couple it with a policy to retard wage and price increases. My guess is that intellectually Tip O'Neill agrees with this but doesn't see it as a political reality. I have good evidence that his office is very receptive to my ideas."