

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

House debates campaign finance reform bill

Campaign finance reform was back at the top of the agenda, as the House of Representatives on Sept. 14 once again debated and passed, by a vote of 252 to 177, a bill sponsored by Reps. Chris Shays (R-Conn.) and Marty Meehan (D-Mass.). The bill is largely the same as that passed last year, only without the Byzantine process. Last year's bill passed so late in the session, in the 105th Congress, that even had the Senate wished to take it up, there would not have been time to deal with it.

The bill has two main features: It bans so-called soft-money contributions, and it regulates so-called issue advocacy ads by interest groups as if they were ads by candidates. Rep. Jim Ramstad (R-Minn.), a supporter of the bill, said soft-money and issue advocacy ads are dishonest ways to circumvent the limits set on direct hard-money contributions to candidates.

Opponents of the Shays-Meehan bill repeatedly said it would not pass constitutional muster. House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) argued it "guts the First Amendment, threatens citizen participation in the political process, and ends the ability of citizens' groups to educate the public unless they file bureaucratic paperwork with the federal government." It is no secret that DeLay, despite this eloquence, is among the most powerful fundraisers on Capitol Hill, and is not afraid to use that power to advance his agenda.

While much was said of the influence of "special interests," the problem of collapsing voter participation was barely touched on. Representative Doug Bereuter (R-Neb.) told the House that "our failure to reduce the disproportionate impact of money in elective politics is having a corrosive

effect on the American political process," and contributes to "suspicion and skepticism" among the electorate. Kevin Brady (R-Tex.) and John Dingell (D-Mich.) both expressed concern that the high cost of running for the House, which now routinely exceeds \$1 million, is discouraging good people from participating as candidates.

Panel hearing on Marianas Islands

On Sept. 16, the House Resources Committee held a hearing on labor and immigration in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands. Not surprisingly, the tone was much more partisan than the Senate hearing held two days before. Committee chairman Don Young (R-Ak.) steered the hearing away from the actual conditions in the C.N.M.I. and instead focussed on federal law enforcement and the use of federal funds on the Islands.

Young and other Republicans on the panel heaped praise on the Islands' economic system for freeing the C.N.M.I. from dependency on the federal government. Young attacked the Clinton administration, including federal law enforcement, for being less than interested in the C.N.M.I.'s problems, which led to the unusual spectacle of the Republicans calling for greater federal presence in the Islands! This included the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which has no permanent presence in the Islands, but has issued scathing reports on the health and safety conditions in Saipan's garment factories. The GOP has in the past heavily criticized OSHA, and expressed an interest in abolishing the agency.

It was left to Committee Democrats, notably George Miller (Cal.) and

Neil Abercrombie (Hi.), to raise the labor and immigration issues from the standpoint of the impact on imported workers and the C.N.M.I. population. Miller said, "The core corruption in the C.N.M.I. is the failure to apply" federal immigration laws, opening the way to "organized crime, communicable disease, and human exploitation" that "not only thrive in Saipan, but threaten every American."

Hastert will bring up HMO reform bills

After weathering heavy criticism from many within his own party, House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) on Sept. 17 issued a statement promising to take up health care reform legislation the week of Oct. 4. "We will," he announced, "have a fair process that at a minimum considers the Coburn-Shadegg bill, the Dingell-Norwood bill, and possibly other alternatives. . . ." He claimed this will allow members to "fairly express their views on the important subjects of patient protections and access to quality health care"—which, he went on to say, is needed—but "without promoting reckless, unlimited lawsuits."

Hastert, with other "compassionate" members of the Conservative Revolution, including Dick Arme (R-Tex.), claims that holding health insurance companies and HMOs liable for their actions, as happens in every other industry, would force increases in premiums and hence in the number of uninsured. This is the line the health insurance industry has promoted for years, in advertising campaigns and through their GOP handmaidens in Congress, to whom they shell out hundreds of millions in campaign contributions.

But about 20 Republicans have

signed on as co-sponsors of the Dingell-Norwood bill, causing splits in the GOP caucus. Dingell-Norwood would allow lawsuits against HMOs for damages, whereas the Coburn-Shadegg bill waters down the right to sue to such an extent that it hardly exists.

GOP struggles with appropriations bills

With the end of the current fiscal year fast approaching, the GOP leadership in both houses has been searching for any trick they can use to pass appropriations bills. Senate Appropriations Committee chairman Ted Stevens (R-Ak.) has floated a plan that would involve shifting some appropriations to fiscal year 2001, breaking the spending caps on certain bills, and/or designating some Pentagon spending as "emergency." The first element of Stevens's plan was labelled "adding a 13th month to the fiscal year" by the *Washington Post*, and immediately became the object of ridicule by the Democrats. Another proposal being floated by the GOP is to slow down the payout of the earned income tax credit, but this is a non-starter for Democrats.

While struggling with their dilemma, the GOP did manage to get the transportation spending bill through the Senate on Sept. 15-16. It required a deal between Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee chairman Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) and Senate Democrats to remove a provision in the bill that would have put a maximum cap of 12.5% on transit allocations to the states. After the deal was struck, the bill sailed through by a vote of 95 to 0.

The Senate Veterans Affairs-Housing and Urban Development appropriations subcommittee marked up its bill on Sept. 16, with a view to find-

ing common ground with the White House. The bill contains approximately \$1 billion more for each housing program and NASA spending than the version passed by the House the previous week.

The big hole remains the bill providing the budgets for the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education. The appropriations subcommittees in both House and Senate are \$16-19 billion short of the Clinton administration's request, in part because the Labor-HHS allocation was raided to bring other bills up to passable levels. In the Senate, Stevens's proposal brings the bill to \$2 billion above fiscal 1999 levels, but the House leadership has yet to agree on how to proceed.

Bankruptcy reform bill languishes in Senate

A major bankruptcy reform bill supported by credit card issuers, has stalled because Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) wants the debate free from what he calls non-germane issues. Democrats had previously announced they would use the bill as a vehicle for an amendment to increase the minimum wage, but Lott crabbed on Sept. 14 that "I don't think it should become an opportunity for Senators to empty their outbox of every political issue that may be around here."

To avoid such problems, Lott filed a cloture motion as soon as the bill came to the floor Sept. 16. However, on Sept. 21 cloture failed by seven votes. Lott did concede that a minimum wage increase is likely to come up before the end of the year. Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) ruled out the chance that it would come up as freestanding legislation.

Even without amendments, the bankruptcy bill is not without controversy. The bill tightens up requirements for filing Chapter 7 bankruptcy proceedings in order to force more people into Chapter 13, which requires payment of at least some of a filer's debts. The outcome of the bill is uncertain.

Subcommittee considers Taiwan Security Act

Senator Craig Thomas (R-Wyo.) travelled over to the House side of Capitol Hill on Sept. 15 to express his strong opposition to the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act, sponsored in the House by Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Tex.). Thomas said, during a hearing of the House Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee, that the current deterioration in China-Taiwan relations is unfortunate, because earlier they had resumed their cross-Straits dialogue. He said he was opposed to the legislation because, as a revision of the Taiwan Relations Act, it would reverse 20 years of policy toward China and Taiwan and would, he said, "destabilize the region."

Other members of the Committee, who are otherwise on the Taiwan bandwagon, were extremely defensive about Taiwanese President Lee Teng Hui's recent remarks about "state-to-state" relations between China and Taiwan. Matt Salmon (R-Ariz.) said he thought Lee's statements were "irresponsible." Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), the Committee's ranking Democrat, also called Lee's statements irresponsible, while otherwise hailing the circumstance that, following the interventions in Kosovo and East Timor, human rights will forever be a centerpiece of U.S. and NATO foreign policy.