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REPORT TO THE PEOPLE FROM YOUR CONGRESSWOMAN

FLORENCE P. DWYER - 6th District, New Jersey



VOLUME VI, NUMBER 2

Thursday, February 15, 1962

In the nearly six years I have served in Congress, I cannot recall a legislative issue so inflated and exaggerated -- by proponents and opponents alike -- as the proposal to create a cabinet-level Department of Urban Affairs and Housing.

So far as I can see, there is nothing in the President's reorganization plan which would justify the extravagant claims of benefits to urban areas voiced by some of its supporters. Nor, on the other hand, is there anything in the plan which would warrant the fears of opponents that responsibilities of cities and States would be usurped by the Federal Government.

I think it is worthwhile, therefore, to look beneath the rhetoric, to push aside the political hullabaloo, and see just what the plan would do and how it might affect Union County, an integral part of the world's greatest urban area. With six of our communities actively involved in urban renewal projects and the entire County interested in mass transportation and other programs affected by the reorganization, we have reason to seek maximum effectiveness and efficiency in the operation of these programs.

Two of a kind

The present reorganization plan is remarkably similar to President Eisenhower's first reorganization plan in 1953 by which the various functions of the old Federal Security Agency were transferred to the new Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In the present case, the functions of the existing Housing and Home Finance Agency -- nothing more, nothing less -- would be transferred to a new Department of Urban Affairs and Housing.

Today, as in 1953, the purpose of the reorganization plan will be to give an agency already in being a new name, elevate it to cabinet status, provide for more efficient administrative control over the various programs involved, and make possible more uniform procedures and more economical "house-keeping" services within the Department.

Let me be emphatic about this! Neither in 1953 nor today is there any question of new programs or new functions or new powers. There are no revisions either upgrading or downgrading present programs. In fact, the law governing the use of reorganization plans specifically prohibits new functions not previously authorized by law.

Why, then, all the fuss and bother about the plan and the new Department it would create?

First, the present reorganization plan differs significantly from earlier legislation designed to create a Department of Urban Affairs and Housing, which was blocked by the House Rules Committee. This legislation would have revised the policy direction of the new Department, increased the Secretary's powers, and added several new high-ranking staff positions. Under the reorganization plan, none of these changes would be possible. The contending groups, however, continue to dispute the issue more in terms of the original legislation than of the more modest reorganization plan.

Decidely political

A second and perhaps more important reason for the controversy is decidedly political. Both sides, for reasons which transcend the issues involved, have decided to make the plan a test of strength in Congress. Supporters take the position that urban areas, with a big majority of the American people, need more help from the Federal Government. They are using the proposal to create a Department of Urban Affairs as a dramatic example of how they are helping these areas -- ignoring the fact that the plan by which the Department would be created does absolutely nothing to provide additional Federal assistance.

Opponents of the plan contend that the Federal Government is already interfering too greatly in the affairs of States and local communities. They argue that a new Department would further centralize authority at the Federal level and lead to abandonment of State and local obligations in favor of greater and greater Federal aid. As reasonable and valid as such objections are, the fact is that there is nothing in the reorganization plan which would increase the Federal role in urban areas or weaken State and local responsibilities.

This was a major concern, incidentally, of our Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, the only agency of government directly representing Federal, State, county and local governing bodies. Instead of taking a position on the question, we cautioned that any Department of Urban Affairs should encourage the role of States, include suburban as well as big city interests, emphasize the coordination of existing responsibilities, and avoid using the new Department to undertake new and unauthorized functions. As I have indicated, the reorganization plan follows the Commission's recommendations, at least negatively.

Confusing the issue

The result of the exaggerations with which spokesmen for both sides have contended for support has been to confuse the central issue in a maze of irrelevancies, not the least of which was the unfortunate introduction of the civil rights issue as the result of the President's announcement that he would appoint the present Administrator of HHFA, Dr. Robert C. Weaver, as the Secretary of the new Department. The fact that Dr. Weaver, a highly competent man, is a negro has no bearing whatsoever on the merits of the reorganization plan. It would not justify voting for the plan and, certainly, it would be a shockingly inappropriate reason for voting against it.

The fundamental issue, in my judgment, is relatively simple. Will the new Department, in actual fact, be better equipped to operate present programs more efficiently and economically? Will the reorganization provide better management, more expeditious administration, less duplication and overlapping, improved coordination, and in general a higher quality of service? These are the objectives Congress has designated by law which must be served by reorganization plans. If, after full study of the hearings and debate, it seems to me the present reorganization plan meets these standards, I shall vote for it. If it appears otherwise, if the plan will serve only to create new levels of cumbersome bureaucracy, then I shall vote against it.

That the present reorganization plan differs significantly from earlier legislation designed to create a Department of Urban Affairs and Housing, which was blocked by the House Rules Committee. This legislation would have revised the policy direction of the new Department, increased the Secretary's powers, and added several new high-ranking staff positions. Under the reorganization plan, none of these changes would be possible. The contending groups, however, continue to dispute the issue more in terms of the original legislation than of the more modest reorganization plan.