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7-2-1970

Report to the People Vol. 14 No. 7

Florence P. Dwyer

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CONGRESSWOMAN DWYER'S

REPORT TO THE PEOPLE

OF THE UNION-ESSEX SUBURBS



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Volume XIV, Number 7

Thursday, July 2, 1970

SETTLING DOWN

It happens nearly every year. Congress returns to Washington in January full of optimistic expectations of adjournment by mid-summer, blissfully overlooking the fact that it hasn't done so even once since the 1946 Congressional Reorganization Act ordered it. By the middle of spring it becomes apparent that Congress is behind schedule, slower than we planned and faced with a heavier workload. Then comes that burst of hopeful activity in May and early June, that slightly desperate effort to get the bills out of committee, onto the House floor, and over to the Senate. Finally, the inevitable resignation to reality -- just too much to do and no responsible way of cutting corners or saving time -- and the settling down to a steadily productive pace.

Which is, if I read the signs rightly, where we are right now. The official onset of summer has brought with it our annual confrontation with the facts of Congressional life: the year-round nature of our responsibilities here. And so the balance of the year begins to take shape: perhaps a two-week recess the latter part of August to give younger Members a chance to relax with their families, return after Labor Day, and another recess (or adjournment if we're really lucky) about mid-October to allow constituents at least a hasty glance at their Congressmen-candidates before they mark their ballots three weeks later.

BIG DECISIONS AHEAD

But between now and then, there will be some big decisions made here in Washington -- and parts, at least, of those decisions are in the making now:

Consumer Protection.--- Seldom, if ever, have I seen a compromise legislative product that so evenly and precisely reflected the original proposals on which it was based as does the new Consumer Protection Act of 1970 to which my Government Operations Committee has now given strong approval. But not only is it an almost mathematically balanced compromise, it is in several substantive respects a considerably improved piece of legislation.

Named by the subcommittee the "Rosenthal-Dwyer Bill" after its principal majority and minority sponsors, the bill is an amalgamation of (1) my original bill of last September which provided for a greatly strengthened and expanded Office of Consumer Affairs in the Executive Office of the President; (2) the Administration bill, based largely on my own, but which also would have placed in the Justice Department the authority to intervene on behalf of consumers in Federal agency and court proceedings; and (3) Rep. Benjamin S. Rosenthal's (D-N.Y. revised bill (replacing his earlier proposal for a Cabinet-level department, an idea consumer representatives rejected) which provided for generally the same range of consumer activities as in my bill but assigned them to an independent agency.

Since there was wide agreement in the committee on most of the functions to be exercised by a consumer protection organization, the principal issue was the question of form or structure -- an issue we resolved by utilizing both the White House office (for coordinating the hundreds of existing consumer programs, making policy, and encouraging greater consumer-mindedness in the Government) and the independent agency (with the power to intervene before Federal agencies and courts on behalf of consumer interests and to continue the valuable work of the National Commission on Product Safety). Advising and "watchdogging" both would be an independent Consumer Advisory Council.

GREAT POTENTIAL

The potential of this new bill for both immediate and long-range benefits to the consuming public is, I think, great. It will mean better and more useful

--more--

information about products, services, standards and government programs; direct action for those with complaints; effective mechanisms for channeling specifically consumer viewpoints into governmental decision-making and, conversely, for requiring decision-makers to account publicly for their decisions in terms of the consumer interest; and a higher quality of protection for consumers from programs now functioning at less than maximum efficiency.

The committee report on our bill should be ready late this week or early next. Then will come House action on the legislation whenever it gets the green light from the Rules Committee and the leadership -- two or three weeks, perhaps? Meanwhile, the Senate Government Operations Committee is trying to reach agreement on a somewhat similar bill. So the prospects look bright for final action this year on a consumer protection package of historic significance -- legislation for which no one can claim exclusive credit but which will be the product of many minds and of a broadening commitment to the idea of honesty in the market-place.

FOR LIFE AND HEALTH

The Environment.-- Congress continues to reflect the widespread popular concern about protecting the environment on which we all depend for life and health. Expected shortly from the Administration is a major reorganization plan which would combine in a new Environmental Protection Administration the air pollution control, water quality, solid waste disposal and related programs now administered by several other agencies. This plan, which will come before our Government Operations Committee for action, is designed to bring us more consistent and better coordinated administration of these programs and, hopefully, greater results.

But results depend on adequate money and authority as well as on good management, and the House in recent days has helped move ahead environmental protection along three lines: (1) extension and strengthening of the Clean Air Act with more funds and authority to set nationwide air pollution standards and control automotive and aircraft emissions; (2) improvements to the Solid Waste Disposal Act to encourage construction of disposal facilities, develop new technologies, promote greater State assumption of responsibility, and find new ways of reducing the volume of and recovering useful materials from solid wastes; and (3) approval of the Public Works Appropriation bill with funds for a major expansion in construction of waste treatment plants to control water pollution.

The latter bill, by the way, contained other items related to environmental protection of special interest to me and to many of you: (1) continuation of the Northeastern United States Water Supply Study (NEWS) designed to assure the end of water shortages and drought; (2) deepening and widening the channels in Newark Bay to improve safety and enlarge the capacity of Ports Elizabeth and Newark; (3) construction of the Elizabeth River flood control project; and (4) a flood control survey of the Rahway River basin, a heavily populated and developed multi-community area which has been subject to devastating flooding. All four projects, I am proud to say, I initiated in recent years.

ALL OR NOTHING

Voting Rights and 18-year-olds.-- President Nixon this past week faced the same kind of dilemma which confronted the House the week before: whether to accept the 18-year-old vote because of the need to continue the protections of the Voting Rights Act for southern Negroes, or whether to sacrifice the voting rights of southern blacks because of opposition to extending the franchise to 18-year-olds.

It was an all or nothing situation. Though the two issues should have been separately considered, the Senate earlier this year made sure that one would go with the other, that separation of the two would have the practical effect of killing both. In the face of this prospect, the House -- by a much larger vote than I had anticipated (272 - 132) -- agreed to accept the Senate package and send it to the President. The President, upon reflection, has now completed the process.