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CONGRESSWOMAN DWYER'S

REPORT TO THE PEOPLE

OF THE UNION-ESSEX SUBURBS



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THE WAY WE DO IT

There's an old song that goes something like this: "It ain't whatcha do, it's the way howya do it."

Translated, it suggests that the means we use are often as important as the ends we seek. As a truism, it applies to all of us. But its application is especially pertinent and important to the public life of our country. For our public bodies and elected officials must not only act wisely and in the public interest but do so in ways that are seen to be open, responsible, equitable and effective. Conversely, means and procedures that are unfair, inefficient or unnecessarily secret can corrupt even the best objectives.

That these generalizations have a direct bearing on Congress is probably obvious. So the fact that Congress, at long last, is making a serious effort to reform its procedures and modernize its methods should be an occasion for great hope and rejoicing. Perhaps rejoicing would be premature for we haven't completed our work as yet, and possibly I'm too close to the action here to judge it as dispassionately as I should. Nevertheless, by the end of the coming week (approximately the date of this newsletter) the debate we began last Monday will have put the House stamp of approval on changes in the way we govern ourselves which are little short of revolutionary. And you have the biggest stake of all in our success

UNREPRESENTATIVE, IRRESPONSIBLE AND ARBITRARY

Consider why!

Major legislative decisions have sometimes been made in the House with no public hearings, inadequate notice to members of committee action (consequently, with no time to prepare), a secret vote in the committee, a committee report explaining the proposal (sometimes written in advance of the decision) printed so shortly before House consideration that members have no chance to look at it, and a final vote in the House with 80 percent of the members absent and no record of who voted or how they voted.

I can conceive of no set of circumstances which could possibly justify procedures of this kind. Yet, to a greater or lesser extent this kind of thing happens all too frequently. When it does, Congress becomes unrepresentative, irresponsible, and arbitrary -- the very opposite of the qualities that ought to characterize what we like to call "the world's greatest legislative body."

And this is what we're now trying to correct.

The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, the bill we're now considering, is complex and comprehensive -- 141 pages in length and accompanied by a committee report 182 pages long. By the time we finish with it, the House will have spent the better part of two whole weeks on the subject, an almost uniquely long debate by House standards and a measure of the extreme significance which members (regardless of their views) attach to these issues.

MORE OPEN, FAIR, AND EFFICIENT

In the barest of outlines, there are two general purposes to this bill:

First, to open and "democratize", if you will, certain committee and floor procedures in order to protect the rights of members as participants in the legislative process, prevent abuses of power, and allow the public a better view of what goes on inside.

--more--

Examples: the right of a majority of members to call committee hearings when the chairman won't act; the requirement that adequate advance notice be given of committee hearings; the right of minority members to call witnesses for hearings and submit separate views to committee reports; the requirement that printed reports be available at least three days in advance of floor action; and permission for TV and radio broadcasting of committee hearings.

Second, to expand and improve members' access to the kinds of information necessary for intelligent legislating.

Examples: the development and in-house management of an independent automatic data processing system; expansion of the present Legislative Reference Service into a Congressional Research Service with increased competence and closer ties to Congressional committees; and a more equitable sharing of committee staffs between majority and minority members.

Most House members, I believe, consider this package an encouraging effort at reform and modernization. A distinct minority believes it goes too far. Many of us believe that several proposed amendments could greatly improve it.

MAKING IT EVEN BETTER

A number of such amendments have already been tentatively approved, which accounts in large part for my optimism. They include: (1) a ban on voting in committee by proxy (a practice by which absent members delegate their votes to chairmen often without knowing what the issues may be); (2) the recording by name and in the committee report of the vote by which a bill is approved by a committee; and (3) the assignment of at least one-third of committee staffs to the minority.

In my opening remarks on the bill this past week, I singled out four of the proposed amendments as deserving special consideration, including numbers (2) and (3) above. Far and away the most important and far-reaching, however, is the proposal to record the names of members as they pass through teller lines on the House floor when we are voting in Committee of the Whole House (a procedure used to expedite consideration of amendments), an amendment of which I am a co-sponsor.

Votes are not recorded by name in Committee of the Whole House. Thus, with no record of how a member votes, and too little time to reach the floor when votes occur, most members find little reason to attend House sessions when amendments are being considered in Committee of the Whole. Yet, in general, these are the most crucial periods of debate on legislation. Decisions in Committee of the Whole are often irreversible and seldom can be appealed on a record vote. For all practical purposes therefore, major public policy issues are being decided in the House by a handful of members acting under a cloak of anonymity.

Under our amendment, if 20 members demand it, votes can be cast in Committee of the Whole House with "tellers" counting and identifying and recording members as they vote. And sufficient time will be given to allow members to reach the floor.

THE BIG ONE

It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of this reform. It will encourage greater attendance by members at times when major decisions are being made in the House. It will make those decisions more broadly representative of the whole House. It will guarantee our people's right to information they need to have. And it will encourage members to accept responsibility which we have no right to evade.

It has been 24 years since the House considered so comprehensive a collection of proposals dealing with its own inner life as that which is before us now. But this "inner life" is not alone the concern of members themselves. Members represent people and are responsible to those people, and so the "inner life" of this institution which greatly influences and shapes what we do here very definitely is your life, too.

A recent President of the United States expressed the whole idea very simply. He said, "Our responsibility is not discharged by the announcement of virtuous ends."