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CONGRESSWOMAN DWYER'S

REPORT TO THE PEOPLE

OF THE UNION-ESSEX SUBURBS



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THE PAUSE THAT REFRESHES -- AND CHALLENGES

Like a healthy young tree whose roots must be buried in the soil from which it obtains its nourishment, an effective Congress must constantly renew its contact with those from whom it receives its power and authority and legitimacy -- the people.

This rather fundamental principle was strikingly confirmed, for me at least, by the late-August Congressional recess from which we returned this past week. In every sense, it was truly the pause that refreshes -- the opportunity to shift gears, to escape the sometimes artificial and unreal world of official Washington, to see the faces and hear the voices once again of the people for whom this institution exists.

It came at just the right time: following closely the extensive round of hearings, investigation, and study which precedes committee action on major legislation and immediately before the numerous important legislative decisions Congress must make in the next three or four months, decisions on taxes, military spending, social security and, beginning this week, on the way we elect our Presidents and Vice Presidents.

THE FIRST TIME

It was also the first occasion since last December for most Members of Congress to spend more than a very few days at a time back home in the districts we represent. As such, it confirmed for me the wisdom of the decision which Congressional leaders made for the first time early this year, the decision to recognize the inevitability of year-long sessions of Congress and schedule in advance a mid-session recess. Many of us have for several years been pressing the leadership to do just this, both to allow for consultations between representatives and the represented and to permit younger Congressmen to arrange for rare but important vacations with their families.

However one chose to spend this time, it could not help but be refreshing and restorative. I chose to stay at home and the change was strikingly apparent -- not only in the physical sense of leaving the heavily circumscribed official environment of Washington for the more open, more relaxed, and less formal atmosphere of suburban New Jersey but especially in the more direct and candid way in which the big issues were faced and discussed by the people most directly affected.

It may be unavoidable, but the bureaucratic system with which Congress must constantly deal and from which we pick up some undesirable habits is frustratingly indirect and ambiguous. It emphasizes the complexities of issues rather than the need for solutions. It thrives on the perpetuation of problems rather than their resolution. By seeing issues as continuing in nature and as multi-faceted and interrelated in character, bureaucracies too often tend to postpone action or prolong the status quo -- to the evident concern and displeasure of the people back home.

DEEPER CONCERN

And people are concerned today -- more, perhaps, or more openly, than I can recall being true in the past. They're concerned about problems which threaten them directly, problems which so far haven't yielded to conventional bureaucratic remedies, problems which could become far more destructive unless effective action is taken soon.

--more--

Based on literally hundreds of personal conversations with people throughout my district, these are the problems which most disturb them: the continuation of the war in Vietnam, high prices and interest rates, high taxes, and inadequate Social Security. Of the four, concern with our position and policy in Vietnam is clearly dominant. The remaining three are so closely related and so directly affected by our Vietnamese involvement that they are basically one, the problem of too little money to meet too many demands, personally and nationally.

But let me deal with them one by one:

1. Vietnam. Disillusionment with the war in Southeast Asia -- its killing, its cost, its disruption, its damage to our economy and our pride and self-respect -- has gone so far that today there are no longer any hawks or doves. Today, there are just people who are deeply sick and tired of the whole thing and who yearn to get out. Reasons differ, of course. Some believe we could have won the war militarily. Others contend that Western wars on the Asia mainland can never be won. While still others insist we never had a right to be there in the first place. But all are united -- or nearly all -- in believing that our present course is fruitless and that we can't or won't or shouldn't do more.

GROWING DOUBT

So far, many opponents of the war are still inclined to credit President Nixon for wanting and trying to end the war. They continue to give this Administration the benefit of the doubt -- but, inevitably, the doubt is growing. They are struck -- as I am -- with the senselessness of prolonging a war that cannot be won, with the brutality of death when the cause and purpose have all but withered away, with the poverty of skill or imagination or commitment which has lost opportunities to negotiate earlier and more effectively.

In this context, therefore, I am particularly encouraged by what I think I see as a growing interest in achieving a mutual and enforceable ceasefire as an essential precondition to ending the war, stopping the fighting, and resolving the political issues. As a long-time proponent of such a ceasefire, and as one who has urged two Administrations now to explore more creatively the opportunities for a ceasefire, I suggest that the death of Ho Chi Minh may be the time to move as vigorously as possible toward this goal.

2. High Prices. On street corners, in their living rooms, over the telephone, and especially in their supermarkets, prices are on people's minds -- prices that steadily go up and seldom come down, prices that reduce their standard of living and deny them some of the basic necessities of life, prices that seem impervious to all efforts to bring them down.

HURT AND FEARFUL

People are being hurt by high prices and interest rates. And at the lower end of the income spectrum, that hurt is generating fear. But at almost every level below the very rich, the pinch is being felt. It's harder to send one's children to college. It's a major burden to invest in a new house. It's more and more difficult to feed one's own family, particularly if meat is a staple food.

People recognize that Congress and the Administration have been trying, that high interest rates, higher taxes, and reduced Government spending are designed to relieve economic pressures, to discourage excessive investment, to stop competition for scarce funds, and thereby bring prices down. But where are the results, they ask. Why haven't these measures taken effect? And, more and more, they indicate a willingness to consider wage and price controls as a last desperate step to protect themselves against inflation.

3. High Taxes. People's attitudes toward taxes are so similar to their feelings about prices as to be almost indistinguishable -- with these differences: they don't feel they're getting what they should from the tax dollars they pay to Federal, State and local governments. They're right. And this, as I've emphasized time after time, is one of our greatest challenges: to organize our purposes and administer our programs so as to achieve maximum results at minimum cost.

4. Social Security. Unless you are in the position yourself, it must be impossible to imagine fully the inexorable and mounting fear generated by rising prices when you're old and dependent largely on Social Security. For Social Security has not moved with prices; it has remained at levels inadequate three years ago. Here, the pinch has become a gouge, a deep decline in the marginal existence of people on low and fixed incomes. And every time the phone rings, I can hear the fear in their voices.

Congress must act now, as I have already urged, to adjust benefits upward.