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Florence P. Dwyer

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## REPORT TO THE PEOPLE FROM YOUR CONGRESSWOMAN

FLORENCE P. DWYER - 6th District, New Jersey



1631 HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING, WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

Volume IV, Number 13

Thursday, July 7, 1960

In the haste and confusion of last Saturday's Congressional recess, you may have missed an extraordinary story-- extraordinary in the extent to which ill-considered legislation can backfire, but all too ordinary as an example of what can happen when the public business is subordinated to election-year politics.

It happened in connection with the minimum wage bill, a bill designed to add about 4 million more workers to the 24 million now covered by the wage and hours law. A substitute proposal which would sharply restrict the bill and limit its coverage to 1,400,000 workers was under consideration. During the debate, an amendment was offered to the substitute aimed at continuing the exemption of certain agricultural workers.

Under the House rules then in effect-- designed to speed up passage of legislation-- only one minute, 60 seconds, was allotted for consideration of the amendment. It was rammed through the House on a voice vote, without a single Member having an opportunity to study the amendment and see what it would do. Shortly after, the substitute measure, including the amendment, was passed by the House. I voted against it, incidentally.

### A harmless amendment?

About 24 hours later, after the legislation had been sent to the Senate, the House woke up to the enormity of what it had done. That harmless-looking amendment, which the House leadership permitted to be debated for all of 60 seconds, not only eliminated 900,000 persons from the expanded coverage of the minimum wage bill, leaving only 500,000 in the bill, but it also wiped out the protection of the existing law for 14 million workers already covered.

Later in the day, the sponsor of the amendment, Congressman Smith, Democrat of Mississippi, confessed on the floor of the House that he hadn't realized the effect of his own amendment.

This obviously, was a dramatic and frightening example of how not to conduct the people's business. Yet, in a hundred less publicized ways the same kind of thing has been happening during the mad rush to abandon Washington and get back to Presidential-year politics. Appropriation bills, for instance, are filled with half-hidden provisions, phrased in technical language, which no one but a handful of committee members understand. Then they are brought to the floor under emergency procedures which deny the House sufficient time to ask questions or otherwise consider most of the items in the bills.

### Legislating on faith

Under these circumstances, the Congress is forced to legislate on faith. And I am sceptical whether faith, in this kind of situation, is adequate protection for the public interest.

Moreover, it doesn't have to be this way. The rules and procedure of the House and Senate give the leadership of the two bodies and their committee chairmen more than adequate authority to conduct the legislative process in an orderly and systematic manner.

During this final session of the 86th Congress, we have been meeting for six months.



Much of the time-consuming work of bill-drafting, organization of committees, lengthy hearings and legislative studies had been completed in the first session of this Congress. And so the leadership should have been prepared to schedule final consideration of legislation throughout these months so as to allow plenty of time for thorough study and full debate.

Instead, day after day, Members have been called to the floor of the House only to find the leadership going through the motions of keeping Congress in session, with little or no significant legislation ready for action. The result: a mass of important bills hurried through Congress under impossibly rushed conditions, almost as many key bills stuck in the last-minute jam, with the Presidential nominating conventions just a week away, and thus a leadership decision to postpone the public business until August. In brief, a monument to poor legislative management.

#### Politics versus business

Why did this happen? Because the leadership of Congress has been too busy politicking this year to pay proper attention to the business of Congress. For instance, at the close of the 1960 fiscal year, June 30, 1960, there were no less than nine major appropriation bills for the new fiscal year which had not been cleared for the President. Had Congress not adopted an emergency resolution, a huge area of the Government would have been forced to close up shop and stop work for lack of necessary authority and funds.

Another example: even in the middle of the rush to finish its business, the House leadership took more than an hour of its precious time to try to put through an amendment giving Congressmen from urban areas the special privilege of sending out "junk mail" addressed simply to "Occupant" over their franks. Fortunately, we defeated this thoroughly unjustified proposal. Yet, on a bill of such over-whelming importance to millions of Americans as the minimum wage bill, the leadership allowed only two hours of debate.

And still another: despite the huge and growing surpluses of wheat and other grains, the best this Congress could do by way of farm legislation was to propose a wheat bill that raised price supports and encouraged further over-production. It was so bad that a coalition of Republicans and urban-area Democrats joined to defeat it.

#### Abandoning the Capitol

And now the leadership has abandoned the mess on Capitol Hill and fled to the convention in Los Angeles, leaving behind a small mountain of the public's business: the vital metropolitan-area commuter bills, school construction assistance, health care for the elderly, minimum wage, aid for distressed areas, housing legislation, Social Security Act amendments, reinstatement of Veterans' life insurance, and a host of others. They propose to return in August to complete this work.

Almost everyone here-- at least privately-- is opposed to this decision. While no one would object to returning to Washington if the public business required it, there is strong doubt about the wisdom of returning under circumstances in which Congress and the public business will be treated as pawns in the game of Presidential politics. Once the party platforms have been written in Los Angeles and Chicago and the parties' candidates have been chosen, the campaign will be on and nothing will stand in the way.

Admittedly, this is a dismal report with which to interrupt my regular Report to the People. Perhaps, somehow, when we resume the reports during the special session in August, there will be better news-- news of a Congress courageously resisting election-year pressures and constructively debating the remaining issues. It is, at any rate, something to work for.