

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, March 9, 2010

10:35 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning.

Okay. We are back in Washington for another interesting, exciting exercise in democracy.

Tuesday we will meet at 2:00. That is today. We'll consider several bills under suspension. We meet at 10:00 on Wednesday, and we will consider several bills under suspension again. And, in addition to that, we will commemorate the 45th anniversary of Bloody Sunday.

I had the privilege for about the fifth or sixth time of walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Sunday, which was 45 years to the day that John Lewis and Hosea Williams led about 600 marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, for the purposes of going from Selma to Montgomery simply for the purposes of registering to vote.

We will also consider H.Con.Res. 248, the "Afghanistan War Powers Resolution" Representative Kucinich has introduced. We will have 3 hours of debate. That is a privileged resolution.

On Thursday and Friday, we will consider H.Res. 1031, a resolution to impeach G. Thomas Porteous, Jr., judge of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana, and further action on jobs legislation.

On jobs, on Friday we were encouraged that job losses continued to decrease. As I have told you, progress but not success. If you compare the 4 months of November to February of

2008 and 2009 to the last 4 months, you see that we are losing approximately 3 1/2 percent as many jobs as we lost in the 4 months' previous comparison. That is real progress. That means that we are losing 94, 94 1/2 percent less jobs. But we are still losing jobs, so we still have work to do.

And we are focused on jobs. The Senate is considering a jobs bill. We passed a jobs bill through the House last week. We hope the Senate takes up that bill and moves it along. We look forward to receiving the Senate bill, as well. We will continue to focus on jobs.

The bill last week, of course, dealt with payroll tax exemption, which we hope will encourage the hiring of people; expensing, which we hope will encourage additional investment by small business; extension of the Highway Trust Fund to ensure that highway jobs continue, that not only do we create jobs but we don't have any layoffs; and an expansion of the Build America Bonds to make local communities -- States and local communities more able to pursue projects which will create jobs for people.

Again, we had an average loss of jobs in the 4 analogous months a year ago of 726,000 per month. We had the same comparison, 26,700. That is where I get the 4 percent, 3.6 percent. Real progress, 700,000 less jobs lost, but not success, so we are going to keep working on it.

I would call your attention, if you haven't seen it, to a Wall Street Journal article written by David Cutler, "Health

Reform Passes the Cost Test." I think it is a very significant article. It puts 10 items for analysis as to whether or not we cut costs. What they do is give us full credit for six out of 10, partial credit for three out of the 10 objectives. That means nine out of 10 we either had full credit or partial credit. And no credit for one, which, of course, is the failure to put a public option in the final bill. We included that in the House bill, and we thought that was an appropriate item which would have been a cost-saving item.

This same report, again in the Wall Street Journal, opines that, although it can't be scored, it scores \$132 billion in savings, that "calculations mirrored by other observers and a host of business and provider groups suggest that the reforms will save nearly \$600 billion over the next decade." Now, you have heard about a trillion dollars in the second 10 years, but this article is saying we save nearly \$600 billion over the next decade and even more in the subsequent one, which would be the trillion dollars.

So that we believe that, in fact, this article in the Wall Street Journal correctly observes that we have done a lot of things which will move us in the right direction.

Obviously, the Goldman Sachs analysis for their investors -- who is going to make money? You know, what is to invest in? Goldman Sachs analysis shows the insurance industry is taking advantage of limited competition by aggressively raising premiums

and other costs. We know that is the case: 39 percent in California, 25 percent here, 30 percent there. As a result, Goldman Sachs says it is a good investment. Why? Because they are going to make high profits. Who is going to pay those high profits? Premium payers. Costs are out of control for families, individuals, businesses, and for government.

This news is on top of recent reports showing next year's premium increases, as I said, average double digits. Most recently, up to 60 percent or more in the individual market in Illinois -- 60 percent. Nobody can afford that kind of increase and expect to retain their insurance.

Not only that, but under the comprehensive legislation that we are pursuing, the industry practices of pre-existing conditions; of saying you have lifetime limits, so if you get really sick, you don't have coverage; and that you have unlimited out-of-pocket expenditures during any 1 year, leading to about 50 percent of the bankruptcies in this country. All of that needs to be dealt with.

Now, lastly, let me deal with an issue that has come up. I will deal with it briefly. Mr. Massa of New York, as you know, my office received a call from his office on February 8th, I believe, bringing to our attention that matter of concern to the staff. My staff asked me about it. I told them that this matter sounded to me as if it was an appropriate matter that should be reviewed by the Ethics Committee. And our advice to staff was that they

report this matter to the Ethics Committee. And if they had not done so within a short period of time, i.e., by Friday -- we heard about this on Wednesday -- that we would initiate that ourselves.

Unfortunately, in the reporting -- the, sort of, shorthand, the reporting says I talked to -- implied that Hoyer directed Massa. I never talked to Mr. Massa. What I have told you happened. My staff talked to his staff. I never talked to Mr. Massa. He is now saying I lied, that I talked to him. I didn't lie. But he is right, I didn't talk to him. He just read your story and thought that it implied that I talked to him. He said I didn't talk to him. He is accurate on that. And I didn't say I talked to him. So let's clear that up.

An open letter from Representative Massa. "In fact, there is no doubt that this ethics issue is my fault and mine alone." I will leave it at that.

Okay. Let's go to questions.

Q Mr. Leader, on health care for a moment, I know that you don't have a definitive way forward yet, but one scenario I have been told here is that you might structure the rule in a way that you can deem the Senate health care bill passed on reconciliation.

Is that the way forward? And what would be the advantage or disadvantage to doing that and getting the guarantees -- you know, you talk about getting guarantees from the Senate side?

Mr. Hoyer. I have talked with many of you about the infinite possibilities of how to get this done, and I'm not going to go

down the road of discussing infinite possibilities.

Clearly, we are pursuing ways and procedures to pass a bill by a majority vote in the House and the Senate which will help resolve the differences that exist between a bill passed pursuant to the rules by a majority vote in the House of Representatives and a bill passed, as Senator Conrad pointed out in his op-ed piece, by 60 votes in the United States Senate. And we are continuing to pursue that process in a way in which we think it can be successful.

Q Are you further along, though, in deciding what that path is?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes. We are always further along than we were yesterday. Even if you learned yesterday that you can't do it this way, so you have to look at another way.

Q So, no decision?

Mr. Hoyer. No decision.

Q Mr. Leader, on Thursday, you said your aim was to get both health care and the budget passed before Easter break. Health care is obviously going to be a very large lift. At the same time, Spratt has not yet had much time to talk to members and groups about the budget. That can be a very hard vote, usually one of the hardest votes each year.

I mean, realistically it just doesn't seem as though you have the votes for that, and presumably you wouldn't want to get --

A And what is your question?

Q Do you really expect to get a budget done before Easter? Is it realistic?

Mr. Hoyer. I'm hopeful. The budget is a very tough item. The President has sent down an austere budget, correctly so, and we will have to deal with that. And Mr. Spratt is dealing with it. And is it going to be difficult? It is going to be difficult.

Our objective is to pass both before the Easter break. Is that going to be difficult? Yes. Is it a deadline? No. I want everybody to understand that it is an objective, not a deadline. And if we can, we can; if we can't, we can't. We will continue to pursue both items.

Q Mr. Leader, over the last months, the Republicans have been trying to instill fear in Democrats by citing polls and saying that any vote to pass health care reform was political suicide.

Doesn't President Obama's statement yesterday that, "I don't know if it is good politics or not, but it is good policy" play into that argument? And how do you reassure your Members that --

Mr. Hoyer. Well, but he then says good policy is good politics, and I agree with that.

You ought to read this Wall Street Journal article just because I think it, from my perspective, lays this -- this is a professor; it is not a reporter. The professor simply goes through and points out what were the 10 objectives, from his

perspective, of health care reform. I think they are accurate. I think it reflects what our 10 objectives were. And then he points out it saves very substantial dollars.

I think there has been a lot of misinformation about this bill early on and continuing. You know, this business about it is a government takeover of health care. It is no more a government takeover of health care than -- well, strike that. It is not a government takeover of health care.

Clearly, it sets up an open market, which as I pointed out in the forum that the President had at Blair House, a free market for transparency and competition. We think that will bring prices down. We think it will give consumers the kind of information they need to make good decisions, and it will make it more affordable for consumers. And we think that is the objective, that we want to have all people, all of our people insured. This adds 30 to 33, 34 million people to the rolls of the insurance companies. Because it does so, it can bring prices down because you're spreading the risk. And because you do that, you can eliminate refusal for pre-existing conditions, you can eliminate lifetime caps, and you can eliminate annual out-of-pocket -- you can put caps on annual out-of-pocket.

So I don't think -- I think this bill -- I don't think; I know. Reading poll after poll after poll, when you ask them about the individual items that I have just discussed, do you think those are worthwhile objectives and should the Congress pursue

them, the answer is yes by over 65 percent. Some are in the 70s. And some items, like the pre-existing conditions, even higher than that. So I think that this bill is a bill that does things that the American public want done.

As I said on the floor of the House, they certainly don't like the process. I don't like the process. And I don't like the confrontation and misinformation that has been spread for, in my opinion, political purposes as opposed to substantive purposes.

Yes?

Q Mr. Hoyer, yesterday, Mr. Massa described what -- he characterized the allegations raised against him. Is it your understanding that that is an accurate characterization of what was brought to the Ethics Committee?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know what was specifically brought to the Ethics Committee. I was asked a question in the press, did I know about it. Well, obviously, I have just told you about it. I knew about it some, I guess days before -- how much? Anyway, I knew about it before, and I said yes. I was not going to lie to the reporter. We were walking down the hall, and he asked me did I know about it.

Q But you never knew what the details of the --

Mr. Hoyer. I knew some, but not the details. I knew what --

Q Are we in the ballpark?

Mr. Hoyer. I did not talk to anybody individually. I want to make that very clear so you don't misinterpret this. A Massa

staffer talked to one of my staffers. When I heard the information, my staffers asked what to do. I believe the issues being raised sounded, to me, serious. I, therefore, said the appropriate venue for dealing with these issues was the Ethics Committee. And my staffer then conveyed that to Mr. Massa's staffer and said that if you don't take action within 48 hours, we will.

Q And was what Mr. Massa described in the ballpark of what your understanding of the allegations were?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, he talked about a number of things. I don't want to go further than that lest I be mischaracterized or that I do mischaracterize. So I -- you know.

Q Mr. Massa said, though -- and I know your staff is responding -- he said that he is being pushed out because of health care.

Mr. Hoyer. Yeah, that's absurd.

Q Can you respond to that and talk about --

Mr. Hoyer. That is really untrue. Absolutely, definitively untrue.

Q How much political pressure is on Democrats, though, to pass this health care bill? How strong-armed are you going to go?

Mr. Hoyer. You're --

Q I'm trying to tie the two together.

Mr. Hoyer. I know you are.

Q Yeah, you're right, you're right. You got me. But

you're not going to answer how much political pressure is on Democrats right now?

Mr. Hoyer. We want to pass this bill. It is absolutely untrue. I will reiterate it to you -- and I don't know whose microphone this is -- that there wasn't any relationship between actions and the health care bill, period. Is anybody confused? Do I need to clarify that? Thank you.

All the way down the end of the table.

Q I just wanted to ask about your negotiations with Mr. Stupak on the abortion language.

Mr. Hoyer. I'm glad you asked that question.

I have had no negotiations with Mr. Stupak. The problem is I'm very candid when people say, did you talk to somebody, and I say, yes, I've talked to him. Now, I could lie to all of you and say, oh, no, I haven't talked to him, I don't know anything about this. And if I said that, you wouldn't, hopefully, believe me.

Mr. Stupak came up to me on the floor and said, I would like to talk to you. I said okay. We have not yet talked about substance. We have talked about his meeting with me, and we will talk when he wants to talk to me. I'm the majority leader. If one of my Members wants to talk to me, I will talk to him.

Q Well, what do you think the best solution --

Mr. Hoyer. There have been no negotiations. Did we all get that?

Q What do you think the best solution is on the abortion

problem?

Mr. Hoyer. I'm not going to go into that. It is a serious issue that obviously confronts the Congress that has to be resolved in a way consistent, I think, with our opportunity to pass health care for all Americans.

Q So, as these negotiations continue between the House, Senate, and the White House, what are the few remaining issues in this corrections bill?

And when do you have to get this bill to CBO for scoring if there is going to be a vote before -- well, the President wants it all wrapped up by March 18th, or you say by March 26th. When does it have to go to CBO?

Mr. Hoyer. The answer to the last question is soon. But, Ed, I'm not going to -- and you're not surprised. I don't resent in any way your trying, but -- we want to get this done. We want to get it done as quickly as possible with a procedure that will facilitate that objective being accomplished. And we are working on that, and we have been working on that, and we are going to continue to work on it.

Q On the elections, you're looking at a whole lot of retirements, a whole lot of open seats. What work over the next --

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know whether the Republicans, as I have told you, can survive over the numbers of retirements that they have had, which are more than ours.

Q Of course. A couple more.

Mr. Hoyer. More is more.

Q What are the best policies over the next 4 or 5 months, the best moves on the floor to make Democrats look as best and shiny as they can on November?

Mr. Hoyer. We have made it very clear there are two major objectives -- I have made it very clear. And Americans are concerned, rightfully, about the economy, growth in the economy, and the creation of jobs. That needs to be our principal focus. They are also concerned, correctly, about the amount of debt that has been incurred in trying to stabilize and bring us out of this great recession, the deepest recession since the Great Depression.

We went into the Great Depression under Mr. Hoover, and we went into the great recession under Mr. Bush. Both times Democrats were elected to try to bring us out. That's what we were elected for. We need to keep doing that.

Health care obviously is one of those efforts. And I refer to this article about the \$600 billion reduction in cost. That is a very substantial reduction. And we need to pursue that. But we need jobs and fiscal balance.

Just recently, we have done three major things. We passed the statutory PAYGO, which will be a constraint on spending. We will have to pay for what we buy in that instance under statutory PAYGO. Secondly, the President has sent down a budget, which is frozen at last year's expense for non-defense,

non-national-security spending. And, thirdly, the President has created a commission. I'm hopeful that commission is successful. My expectation is it is a high bar; 14 out of 18 members of that commission have to agree. But I'm hopeful they will make substantive proposals that we can then approve in December. We will have to see what they are. I'm not going to precommit to being for or against proposals.

But all three of those are steps in the direction of returning us to fiscal balance and fiscal responsibility. And so I think a focus on jobs and fiscal responsibility will be our two major focuses.

Q Mr. Leader, on abortion --

Mr. Hoyer. Now, you can either have a question now or in the hallway. Take your pick. Go ahead, I'm kidding you.

Q On abortion, you said that it is a serious issue that has to be resolved. Just to be clear, do you believe that it has to be resolved in order for the health care bill to pass the House?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't have anything to be clearer about than it has to be resolved.

Q Can the bill pass without its being resolved?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I think it will be resolved one way or the other, and I think the bill will pass after its resolution. I don't know -- it's got to be resolved.

Q Mr. Hoyer, a number of Senate Democrats, led by Schumer,

were pushing the Treasury and the Department of Energy to suspend the wind energy grant program, the stimulus that was in the Build America language.

Mr. Hoyer. I'm not familiar with it.

Q Not familiar? Okay.

Q Mr. Leader, 4 years ago, you guys ran as the reformers. We kind of all -- Speaker Pelosi referred to the "new direction" Congress, but it was part of the core piece of your mission. The public seems to no longer view you guys as reformers.

What are you going to do on those steps to try and get that back? Is it earmark reform?

Mr. Hoyer. Repeat the facts. Repeat the facts. We have made very, very substantial reforms in this Congress. The beginning of the 110th Congress, or the last Congress, ban gifts from lobbyists, prohibit the use of corporate jets, mandated ethics training for all House employees, established an office of congressional ethics. We ensured transparency for earmarks, requiring full disclosure of all bills and conference report, forfeiture of pension annuity for congressional service if a Member is convicted of a serious crime, broader and more detailed disclosures of lobbying activities by paid lobbyists. And we've done more than that.

In addition, the new direction was a new direction. We adopted a minimum wage for people at the very lowest end of the spectrum. We adopted the -- and added 4 million children to

health care. So we have done some very substantial things that the public clearly wanted to do, and there was no confusion but that we would do that.

So I think the answer to your question is we have moved in a direction -- we cut earmarks just almost by half, so that we have made some real progress. The negative noise out there is at almost a deafening level, and it drowns out, too often, the facts.

Q This is really quick. Is the 18th, Thursday, a viable date for a health care vote? Does it remain a viable date, or is it off the table?

Mr. Hoyer. Your premise is incorrect. You mean that date that Mr. Gibbs mentioned? None of us have mentioned the 18th other than Mr. Gibbs.

We are trying to do this as soon as possible. That continues to be our objective.

Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 10:59 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]