

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, March 23, 2010

1:30 p.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Hello. Our crowd has thinned out a little bit from last week. Well, welcome everybody.

This was an historic day. I just got out of the White House about an hour and a half ago. The President of the United States signed the health care bill into law. We now are looking forward to the improvements to that being passed relatively soon by the Senate and then sending that down to the President for signature, at which time we will have adopted one of the most historic pieces of legislation that I have had -- the most historic, probably, that I have had the opportunity to vote on in 30 years in Congress in the United States. I was the sponsor of the Americans with Disabilities Act that had a very, very positive effect, signed by George Bush in July of 1990, almost 20 years ago; but clearly, this bill's reach is broader and deeper, and will have a positive effect, in my view, on every American's life.

Whether you have insurance, whether you are ill or whether you are well and don't have insurance or whether you have a preexisting condition, this bill will make a difference in your life.

This bill will reduce our deficit very substantially: not according to us, but according to the CBO, over \$140 billion in the first 10, over \$1 trillion in the second 10.

Immediately, young adults who are younger than 26 through age 26, as so many young people have found coming out of college or

they're not ready to get or can't get insurance or can't afford insurance, will be covered under their family's policy. There will be a high-risk pool immediately for those who can't get insurance, but who need it, but who have preexisting conditions. A pool will be available for them immediately.

Small business tax credits will be available for millions of small businesses to help them get insurance. We are also going to provide immediately that there won't be lifetime limits or annual caps on coverage.

Republicans have, to a person, opposed that bill. Their rhetoric was that it was harsh, inflammatory and of concern to the American people. This was not a government takeover. In fact, as all of you know, the exchanges are all private insurers. The States will set up their own exchanges, and private insurers will offer their policies on a transparent market, which will give consumers the best choice at the best price.

The rhetoric that has been used throughout the past year and a half has been polarizing, much misinformation, and has led not only to some very harsh behavior of demonstrators here, relating to particularly minority Members, but also to some, clearly, out-of-order conduct on the Floor of the House of Representatives.

I was disappointed when some demonstrators in the Gallery menaced and tried to disrupt the proceedings of the House, and the Republican Members got up and cheered them on or at least clapped for their actions. That is inconsistent, in my opinion, with how

we ought to conduct ourselves, and it is, to some degree, understandable why non-Members of the Congress feel that conduct that either threatens or is extraordinarily decisive is sanctioned.

In any event, it is an historic day. We have taken an historic step, and it is a step that, I think, people will look on over the coming months as very positive for them, their families, their children, their businesses, and their country.

Now, having said that, this success is not the end of what we need to be doing in this Congress. As I told you and as I have told you weekly, our focus in this session of Congress is on jobs and economic growth -- of growing our economy, of getting people back to work. Eight million people lost their jobs from '07 to the middle of this year -- last year -- and that has caused a lot of distress and pain in America, and we are going to be dealing with that, probably, this week. Unless the Senate passes the unemployment insurance and COBRA by unanimous consent, we will have to do something further on that.

This week, the House will take up two measures which will help create jobs: the Small Business and Infrastructure Jobs Tax Act, which extends the Build America Bonds Act. It gives a 100 percent exclusion for small business capital gains, an increase in deduction for start-up expenditures, all of which are designed to try to spur small business growth, because, obviously, we know small businesses create many, if not most, of the start-up jobs in

America.

We will also later consider the Disaster Relief and Summer Jobs Act, which will, we think, provide for at least 300,000 jobs for youth ages 16 to 24 this coming summer.

We will give the Small Business Administration some additional funds to extend the Recovery Act Small Business Lending Program, which helped to save or create 560,000 jobs. We want to make sure that continues.

Last week, as you know, the President signed the HIRE Act, which included a payroll tax exemption which says, if you hire new employees -- and as I said last week, the good news about that bill is it technically doesn't cost us any money because it's new jobs. We want new jobs. If people hire new, then they will get a FICA tax credit. In addition, that bill deals with infrastructure and other actions which, we think, will help grow the economy.

Let me stop with that. I've told you what the schedule is. Other pending business that may come before us is the FAA reauthorization, extending expiring provisions, which I've talked about, not just unemployment and COBRA. Obviously, the satellite, the highway bill, we have done, but there are some other provisions that we need to make sure don't lapse, and health care reconciliation, of course, needs to be passed by the Senate.

All right. Your turn.

Q How much concern is there, Mr. Leader, among the leadership or among the rank and file that you are hearing that

the Senate won't pass reconciliation cleanly, from your perspective, and that they could wind up making major changes? Is that a concern over here or are you willing to just sort of roll with whatever they do?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think it's a concern. Senator Reid and I have talked over the last 2 days extensively. We talked just now down at the White House. I've talked to a number of members of the United States Senate. I think they clearly understand that, essentially, this is a conference report. You've all heard me say that. You've heard me explain the process of a conference report. Conference reports come back and you vote on them. The reconciliation bill is essentially a conference report.

Now, the good news is that the Senate committee found that there were no Byrd-able items in the bill. That is not dispositive. I mean, there is still ability to raise issues, but the parliamentarian has ruled against one of the major complaints regarding Social Security. It says we don't affect the Social Security. As a result, I'm reasonably confident that the Senate is going to defeat any amendments that are offered on the theory that this is a conference report.

The conferees met, reported out. We did it two step, which is our usual. We've taken the Senate bill, then approving it with a later bill; but nevertheless, I think a majority of the Senators understand that that's the context in which they find themselves, and I don't expect any changes.

Q In terms of scheduling, you guys are going for the Passover/Easter recess then for the next 2 weeks, correct?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q If the Senate sends it back over, would you keep the House here this weekend or in early next week to finish this process?

Mr. Hoyer. Look, I expect the Senate to be able to do its work before the end of the week. Therefore, I don't want to go there, but I will tell you that we want to see this finished before we leave here.

Q Do you support the Vice President, the presiding officer in the Senate, in that role of overriding the parliamentarian if there is a ruling that comes back that seems not favorable to Democrats?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I don't want to prejudge that.

The Vice President, I'm sure, will be presiding should his vote be needed, but I think he will be there because it is an historic action, and I don't want to anticipate what he will rule or not rule. I hope that the parliamentarian finds that all the I's are dotted and T's are crossed, and we're ready to go.

Q Why would you not keep the House in, let's say, over the weekend? Are there CODELs? Are there other problems?

Mr. Hoyer. Did I say we would not keep the House in?

Q Are you saying there has been no decision on that whether we would?

Mr. Hoyer. What I said was I expect the Senate to complete its business by the end of the week and to complete its business, hopefully, in a way that will send the bill directly to the President.

Q Mr. Hoyer, just to follow up on that, you said you didn't expect any changes, but Senator Baucus earlier today said he thought there could be a couple of Byrd-able changes, minor changes even.

Are your Members prepared to vote again before they leave for recess? Are you worried about having to send this back and have changes again on this package?

Mr. Hoyer. I was with Senator Baucus just a few minutes ago. He didn't mention that -- not a few minutes ago, about an hour ago. He did not mention those concerns. I think, in an abundance of caution, everybody says, obviously -- you know, like sometimes I tell you things are possible, and it's reported out that I think that's what is going to happen. I've got to be very cautious about what I think is possible because I think most things are possible, but in this instance, I don't expect there to be changes.

As of this point in time, the Budget Committee does not believe there are items that are Byrd-able in the bill. That is a very positive sign. As I said, that was not dispositive of the issues. You still have the parliamentarian who could rule; but, you know, if there were minor changes -- I don't expect there to

be changes, but if there were changes, I think the answer to your question is, yes, our Members are prepared to vote.

Q Before they leave?

Mr. Hoyer. Before they leave.

Q Leader Hoyer, Virginia, along with a few other States, is suing the Federal Government, charging that the individual mandate in the health care bill that is signed into law today is unconstitutional.

House Judiciary Committee Chairman John Conyers said that the General Welfare clause in the Constitution grants Congress the authority to mandate an individual's getting health insurance. Do you agree with the chairman?

Mr. Hoyer. We clearly believe that the bill's provisions are, in fact, constitutional and will be so held.

Q Mr. Leader, I'd like to change the subject.

Now that you have cleared up health reform, are you ready to move to D.C. voting rights? Are there any other problems besides the gun amendments that you foresee that would hold up passage? I reminded you before that only six Democrats voted against this bill in 2007. So are we now at a point where the bill can actually be moved?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, we are certainly at a point where it can be moved, Mark. As you know, I want to see it moved. As you know, there has been substantial concern about the Ensign provision. That remains a concern.

Q Has that been cleared up?

Mr. Hoyer. I'm not sure what you mean by "cleared up." Let me say this, Mark:

Clearly, the Ensign provision has a majority of votes on the floor to support it. I don't support it, but it has a majority of the votes on the floor, and obviously, it had a majority of votes in the Senate to support it. So we've got to try to deal with that, which causes you problems either on the rule or on the bill, itself, depending upon, you know, what stage you get to, but I'm still hopeful that we can see a path to passing that.

Now, I want to say, though, Mark -- I want to make it clear -- that there is another problem as well. It's not just the Ensign provision. The Senate bill differs from the House bill in that the House bill provides for an at-large election. The later it has gotten, the less acceptable it is for, I think, Utah, itself, but also for the Members to see an entire redistricting this close to the election. So there is that difference. I think it can probably be resolved. I hope it can be resolved.

Q How can it be resolved?

Mr. Hoyer. By having an at-large election in Utah for one cycle.

Q I have a health care question, non-process related.

Taking the example of your own district in Maryland, can you speak to some of the immediate effects now as we talk about the substance of the bill?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I don't think there will be -- you know, I spoke to five or six immediate impacts that there will be already. I don't think, in my district, there will be effects that will not be felt universally throughout the country, but I do think that this will provide for access for somebody who can't get insurance now, due to a preexisting condition, in the interim before the exchanges are up and running for the high-risk pool.

I think students, for instance, who come out of the University of Maryland or out of St. Mary's College or out of CSM, the Community College of Southern Maryland, who can't find a job immediately, but who may be 23, will still be insured. The other things I mentioned, in terms of lifetime limits and annual caps, will all apply in Maryland as well as throughout the country.

I, frankly, think -- I really do believe -- that once Americans who have had reservations about this bill look at the specifics and at the positive impact that it will have, they are going to think this is a good thing.

I also think, of course, that deficit reduction will, you know, help throughout the country. So I think that -- you know, I can't think of a specific difference that the Fifth Congressional District will have.

I want to also make a point. We have said, if you have it and you like it, you can keep it. I know I have a large number of Federal employees and a large number of veterans in TRICARE. Republicans tried to raise some issues about TRICARE. Federal

employees clearly will be perceived on this statute as meeting the requirement of having insurance as will those who have TRICARE as having insurance, and we are not going to adversely affect anybody either on the TRICARE program or under the Medicare program.

The assertion that we are cutting Medicare benefits is absolutely untrue. Are we saving money from overcompensating insurers in the Medicare program? Yes, we are, and they going to be paid at the same rate that everybody else is paid.

But I think my answer would be I think we will be affected in Maryland positively as will the rest of the country.

Q Do you think Mr. Neugebauer should apologize to Mr. Stupak on the floor? Second, do you expect either he to do that or any Democrat to do anything on the floor of that subject?

Mr. Hoyer. Mr. Neugebauer's letter that he sent -- I don't know. I presume all of you have seen his letter. Have you all seen his letter? I don't know that I have the letter, but I'll read it to you if you haven't seen it?

"Last night was the climax of weeks and months of debate on a health care bill that my constituents fear and do not support. In the heat and emotion of the debate, I exclaimed the phrase 'it's a baby killer' in reference to the agreement reached by the Democratic leadership. While I remain heartbroken over the passage of this bill and the tragic consequences it will have for the unborn, I deeply regret that my actions were mistakenly interpreted as a direct reference to Congressman Stupak, himself."

He goes on to say, "I have apologized to Mr. Stupak and have also apologized to my colleagues for the manner in which I expressed my disappointment about the bill. The House Chamber is a place of decorum and respect. The timing and tone of my comment last night was inappropriate."

I agree that the timing and the tone of his comment was inappropriate. I agree that it undermined the decorum of the House. He has apologized to Mr. Stupak, personally. Most of us heard it as -- we didn't hear the "it's." He says he said "it's." I take him at his word.

However, as I said at the beginning, Members of Congress ought not to act like some people have acted in town meetings. That is not good for our democracy. It is not good for the civility of our democracy, and it is not a good lesson for those who are watching us who may not have the restraint that, hopefully, adults in the Congress of the United States have.

What while there can be disagreements -- and I disagree strongly with Mr. Neugebauer's characterization of what this bill does. In my opinion, we do not change the law at all with respect to the use of Federal funds for abortion, period. That is a wide view. It was the view of 59,000 nuns in America. It was the view of the Catholic hospitals in America. It was the view of the number of editorial writers who were writing for Catholic publications. There can be a difference on this issue, I understand that. There can be an honest difference on this issue,

but characterizing the bill as that is a misrepresentation of the bill, and again, it is inflammatory in language, which I think is unfortunate.

Now, having said that, he has apologized. He indicated that he undermined the decorum, and he apologized to the institution, itself. I don't think we need to carry it further.

Q So what do you think can be done to maintain a higher level of decorum?

Mr. Hoyer. I, frankly, think having signs hung out of the windows or in windows or placards hung out on the balcony are not consistent with this Capitol. That does not mean that people, obviously, can't go out and carry signs on the grounds or talk to and exhort people who come here. That is certainly appropriate -- we all do that -- but the essence of democracy is discussion and debate, not confrontation for confrontation's sake.

Q Are you suggesting a rule change?

Mr. Hoyer. No. Just when did I suggest a rule change?

Q I'm just wondering.

Mr. Hoyer. That is the second time you've wanted to say something I said.

Q Smoking is not allowed out there.

Mr. Hoyer. Right.

Q Mr. Leader, just on that, Mr. Stupak was on CNN last night, and he said that he thought that the Republican leaders should bring their conference together and tell Members that, if

they couldn't behave with decorum, they shouldn't be on the House floor.

Do you think it would be appropriate for the Republican leadership to take some kind of step like that?

Mr. Hoyer. I certainly think it would be appropriate for the leadership to caution Members on both sides of the aisle to realize that conducting ourselves in a way that is a positive reflection of legitimate differences and discussion and debate is much more productive than to inflame people who might not be as restrained among the public. We have seen violent acts committed in this country based upon differences of opinion, and we ought to all be very careful as leaders in this country to conduct ourselves in a way that demonstrates to the public how we ought to act.

Q Mr. Leader, it's late March. Even though you've passed the health care bill and you're still attending to some of the details of it, it's an election year. How much time is there left in this session before the election to get anything of significance done or is the health care bill sort of the caps at this point?

Mr. Hoyer. The reason I'm hesitating is, for a question to be asked is there time for you to get anything significant done, we have just passed within hours the most significant bill you have covered.

Q I understand.

Mr. Hoyer. Having said that, you have covered over the last year some of the most significant, productive legislation that has been signed. I don't mean just sitting over at the Senate but that has been signed.

We addressed one of the largest economy rescue bills that I voted on in 30 years -- the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Since that time, the stock market has gone up, depending upon on whether you follow the Dow or the S&P, over 60 percent, over 70 percent and over 80 percent.

We have reduced the loss of jobs by 96 percent. The economy has gone from a 6.4 percent decline to a 5.9 percent growth last quarter to last quarter.

We passed a financial regulatory bill through the House. We passed an energy bill through the House.

I, frankly, think this has been one of the most productive sessions in which I have participated.

We need to reach financial regulatory -- I talked to Senator Dodd about that today. We're moving ahead on that.

I might also say that the education component is one of the most significant and has saved \$67 billion.

So my view is this has been a pretty significant Congress. It has stepped up to the plate as well as any Congress, perhaps, in history, and this President has acted more decisively than, probably, recent Presidents have in terms of effectively addressing the problems he said he would address, not the least of

which is Iraq and Afghanistan, where we are making significant progress.

Where we had been, frankly, in retreat for some 8 years in Afghanistan, we are now, obviously, on the offense, taking out terrorists and stabilizing that country. We have now seen an election in Iraq. We are all hopeful that the election results will not lead to further either violence or disunity in that country.

Forgive me for responding in such a pointed way. I think this Congress has done a lot and hasn't shirked its responsibilities. You can agree or disagree, but it has been a very productive Congress.

Q You are working on two jobs bills this week.

Can you tell us when the votes are going to happen for both of those? Also, do you plan to take up the Senate jobs bill if they send it over to you?

Mr. Hoyer. I think we will probably have a conference on that. I think we will probably have a conference on that. I don't want you to take that to the bank that Hoyer says there's going to be a conference on that, on the Senate-passed bill; but on the other two bills, I expect on Wednesday and Thursday we will consider those two bills.

Q Mr. Leader, can I ask you a question arising out your meeting with Mr. Netanyahu this morning?

There is some confusion about what Palestinian leaders told

you last year about Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. One of your colleagues on the other side said today that you said that the Palestinians said they were okay with that, and then there are some questions about whether that has been clarified.

Now, what did the Palestinians tell you last year about Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state?

Mr. Hoyer. The Palestinian Prime Minister was Salam Fayyad.

Mr. Cantor is the individual you're referring to. This wasn't a secret meeting, I guess, seeing as how he talked to you about it. He made the observation correctly that the Palestinians have yet to state definitively that Israel not only has the right to exist, which is absolutely essential for any agreement to go forward, but also that it has the right to exist as a Jewish State.

It is a unique state in so many ways, set up by the United Nations, but referred to in the Balfour resolution of 1917. So it was essentially 31 years later that the United Nations set aside, in effect, Israel as a sanctuary for a people that has been savaged through the millennia. It is the policy of the United States that they have the absolute right to exist and to exist as a Jewish state.

Mr. Fayyad responded to my question, saying that Israel certainly has the right to refer to itself as a Jewish state. Now, does that mean that he said that they have the right to be a Jewish state? I guess you could parse those words, but in any

event, that's what he said. I think the disagreement is what did he mean by that; but whatever he meant by that, it is clear that there has not yet been a definitive statement by all of the Palestinians that that's the case, and it needs to be.

Q At the risk of raising the "what have you done lately?" thing, can you give us a quick outline of what you see happening in the April-May work period and what topics and whether that will include a budget resolution?

Mr. Hoyer. I haven't talked to Mr. Spratt today. Clearly, we wanted to do the budget resolution before Easter, but as a result of the reconciliation and the health care bill, that was not possible. As a result, I want to talk to Mr. Spratt about his time. Certainly, April would be the target for us to do that when we come back.

You heard me talk about regulatory reform. Obviously, we have the appropriations process.

There is still an energy bill pending in the Senate, which, as you know, Senator Graham and Senator Kerry and others have been working on what they could do. Obviously, that would be one of our objectives to look at when they come back.

There are obviously other matters, the largest which, of course, is the D.C. vote. I'm teasing, but it's very important to me, I know that. There are a number of matters that we are going to be addressing.

[Whereupon, at 2:04 p.m., the press conference was

concluded.]