

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,
STENY H. HOYER

Wednesday, April 22, 2009

11:33 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning.

Okay. Briefly, this is a relatively noncontroversial week.

Today we have a number of bills dealing with energy out of the Science and Tech Committee, which essentially we want to focus on Earth Day. Obviously, this is the 39th anniversary of Earth Day. I remember participating in the first one, as I was a member of the State Senate at that point in time, back in 1970. And, clearly, one of the focuses of this administration and of the Congress is energy independence, but also energy independence that is energy use consistent with environmental concerns.

Tomorrow we will have the National Water and Research Development Act. Again, a lot of amendments. I don't think the bill itself is particularly controversial, but there will be a lot of amendments to that.

During this work period, Democrats remain very focused on the economy. The administration is focused on the economy. There are a lot of other issues, but we continue to have an economy that is struggling. We continue to be seeing the loss of jobs and many Americans being put at risk.

Coming up, we hope to do the budget conference report, which is, we believe, all of the bills that we have passed are consistent with trying to create jobs and invest in our economy and invest in our future. We are hopeful that a budget conference report will be done in the near term. That would be within the

next couple of weeks -- not a deadline, but we hope to get it done within the next couple of weeks.

Next week we are going to have both hate crimes but, in addition to that, we are going to have credit card holder bills of rights.

One of the things that we are very concerned about is that consumers have not been treated as fairly as they should have been in this entire process. And credit card holders, in particular, are being subjected to interest rates and practices which we think are not fair. This bill will speak to that. That will come out of Barney Frank's committee. Carolyn Maloney has been a leader on this issue.

And I might say that Congressman Frank continues to have an extraordinary heavy load, workload, in his committee and continues to handle that with great ability and focus on consumers and trying to minimize the risks to consumers.

In addition, mortgage reform legislation will occur. Predatory lending will be coming out of the committee, we believe, this week or next.

We are going to focus on clean energy legislation, which is a key part of the President's agenda and ours. As you know, there was a 600-page bill put on the table as a draft, as a proposal, as a discussion document -- not a proposal as a bill but as a discussion document.

Hearings are going on now. There are going to be four

hearings to discuss the American Clean Energy and Security Act draft. We believe those hearings will lead to action prior to the May break on a bill that will be proposed to the House that we will consider early in the summer.

We are also working in the Energy and Commerce Committee, the Education and Labor Committee, and the Ways and Means Committee are all looking at health care legislation. That is another leg, as you know, on the President's, in effect, three major priority stool, education being the third: energy, education, and health care. Health care, we expect to see substantial activity this work period in committee. We expect that committee work to be completed sometime in the very early summer, and we are hopeful that we will be considering health care legislation on the Floor by the August break.

Democrats held more than 150 events over the last 2 weeks on health care issues. I held one myself that was in Bowie, covered on C-SPAN. And I think there was a consensus, certainly, overwhelming consensus of the need for substantial health care reform which achieves the objectives of universal coverage and accessibility to quality, affordable health care for all Americans.

I think that effort will continue. The committees have had 10 hearings on health reform in the last 3 months, and I expect that activity to continue through this work period.

I also, during the work period, as some of you know, took a

CODEL to Mexico, Panama, Colombia, and Brazil. In Mexico, President Calderon came back during our stay there, which was relatively brief, but we did not get an opportunity to meet with him. I have met with him in my office.

It is clear that Mexico is making a very substantial effort and that, in partnership with the United States, in addressing the growing drug trafficking problem, violence in Mexico, violence along the border. And it is clear to me that the Mexican Government is committed to having success in undermining the ability of narco drug traffickers in trafficking through Mexico and in Mexico and, in effect, controlling many of the areas in Mexico -- or some of the areas, I don't want to say many areas -- some of the areas in Mexico.

In Panama, we also discussed, focused on the drug trafficking and the increasing inclination to traffic through Panama. As we have been more and more successful in the Gulf and in the Pacific in stopping sea traffic, obviously more land traffic has occurred. And that is a challenge to all of the Central American countries.

We met with President Torrijos. Obviously, we also discussed the issue of trade. And they are taking steps to both confirm the protections of workers to bargain and bargain collectively, to organize, but also to address concerns that have been expressed not only by the United States but by the international community and the G-20 to ensure that the laundering of money, the secreting of money is diminished and that the participation by Panama in

allowing that to occur through policies in their banking system are changed. Hopefully, that will be done.

My own view is, of course, that it is my understanding the administration is interested, at least Mr. Kirk's statements, of moving Panama in the relatively near future -- Panama Free Trade Agreement.

In Colombia, I had not been to Colombia before, so I can't say from my personal standpoint that there has been progress made from the time I was there last, because I wasn't there a last. But I can say that, based upon discussions with our Embassy, based upon discussions with those who know what the situation has been, we visited Brazil -- excuse me, and we went to Medellin.

Clearly, the experience of the past with respect to control in Medellin by many drug lords and drug thugs is not now the case. That has been turned around. It has been clear that -- we met with the Colombian Navy leadership, which has stepped up its efforts, in concert, in partnership with us. Plan Colombia obviously has invested a lot of money in going after the growing, refining, shipping, transporting of drugs from Colombia. I think substantial progress has been made.

We also met with labor leaders who were both for and against the free trade agreement that has been pending. And we discussed with President Uribe, obviously, both of those subjects.

We also then went to Brazil, where we had a meeting that was scheduled for half an hour that lasted about an hour and a half

with President Lula, which we thought was a very engaging, useful meeting. Obviously, we were expressing, on behalf of the United States Congress, the importance we attach to Brazil as a partner in hemispheric efforts. It was clear to me that President Lula wants such a partnership. It is also clear to me that he and our President, President Obama, have a very positive relationship and that President Obama has himself indicated that a partnership, close partnership, is desirable for us and, he believes, Brazil as well.

So it was a very useful trip.

Okay, let me stop with that and turn it over to you.

Q Mr. Majority Leader, on the budget, Senator Conrad has talked about meeting with Spratt yesterday, kind of their -- now that everyone is back in town and back at the table and so on. And he seemed Monday to be a little bit more like, this is going to be a long slog to hash out these differences. Yesterday he seemed a little bit more optimistic.

I was wondering if you could give us some feedback from --

Mr. Hoyer. I wasn't in the meeting, but I can give you the feedback from Mr. Spratt. Mr. Spratt thought the meeting was a very positive meeting. He thought they have made progress. There obviously are still issues outstanding. They will be working on those today, tomorrow, the next day. And the staffs will be working, as well. And we are very hopeful that we will make very substantial progress and we will be able to do something in the

next couple of weeks.

Q You are still keeping the "next couple of weeks." I mean, is there any reason -- are you poor-mouthing the chances of getting it done sooner?

Mr. Hoyer. No. But nor do I want to set a date of the 25th of April and you say, "It is the 26th of April, and you fell flat on your face, Hoyer." So I am a little flexible.

You know, sometimes setting these dates is not a wise choice, because you are dealing with Members of Congress who -- and two houses that both have strong feelings on issues. And sometimes it takes a little longer to get to consensus than you might think.

So, no, I am not poor-mouthing doing it sooner. I would like to do it sooner. We are going to do it as soon as it is possible to get done.

Q Mr. Leader, in terms of health care reform, there seems to be, kind of, growing opposition from the Republicans when it comes to certain initiatives that are favored by the administration and most Democrats: comparative effectiveness research, government-sponsored health plans.

I am wondering how that opposition might affect or be taken into account on legislation in the House, when it comes to health reform?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, Congressman Blunt was with me on the trip to Mexico, Panama, and Colombia. He did not go to Brazil with us; he was unable to do that. And we took the opportunity to have a

very brief discussion, and I expect to have discussions with him later this week, maybe as early as tomorrow. He is, as you know, the chair of the health task force on the Republican side.

Clearly, there are differences. Clearly, there are concerns. But I also believe that there is an opportunity for us to try to work together and come to agreement on issues.

You express two specific concerns, one about a so-called public plan option and the other on the comparative effectiveness research. Let me stress that the President has made it clear that, whatever we do, we intend to pass a plan which leaves choice of doctor, of health care, and of keeping one's insurance that people now have. Nothing in the bill that we, I think, are going to move forward will undermine that.

And there is also significant sentiment, as you know, in the country, not just among Democrats, in the country, for a public option. It wouldn't be mandated, but it would be an option available to people in the event that they could not get insurance which they felt was appropriate or could afford in the private sector.

As you know, Republicans did that in the prescription drug bill itself. So they provided for a public option there. Now, we haven't used a public option because two plans have been available in every region of the country, but a public option is provided as an alternative.

In terms of comparative effectiveness, I believe that

comparative effectiveness envisions doing research on finding out what works best, what is most costly -- I mean what is most efficient and cost-effective, is what I meant, and that such information should be made available to providers: docs, hospitals. The intent is not to make that mandatory.

Q How soon do you think the administration will submit the Panama Free Trade Agreement?

And, if I may, how soon do you think Congress will pass legislation that would keep the pledges that the administration made at the G-20 on, I think, a \$100 billion loan for the IMF?

Mr. Hoyer. As it relates to -- I don't know the answer to your first question. I don't know. Mr. Kirk referenced it. I don't think the President has made a statement on that. I have not talked to the President about it personally.

I think -- frankly, I think there is an inclination that Panama, I think, is relatively -- relatively -- noncontroversial, to the extent that any trade agreement is noncontroversial. I think there are a couple of things that Mr. Levin and others have suggested needed to be done, and I have referenced both of those. And I think that Panama is moving to do that. They are in session now, I think, or they are going to be next week. They are moving to do some of those things.

But I don't know when the administration is going to submit those.

With respect to the second question, which was the -- what

was the second one?

Q About the IMF.

Mr. Hoyer. The IMF. We discussed that this morning. As you know, the G-20 talked about a \$500 billion increase in IMF's ability. \$100 billion of that would be U.S., 20 percent. The President made that commitment.

They have not yet submitted a request for that, but I think we anticipate such a request come in the near term. They have submitted, as you know, the supplemental, \$84.3 billion. But they have not submitted that.

Q I thought he wrote a letter saying he would like to have it.

Mr. Hoyer. I think he wrote a letter saying he would like to have it.

Q Are you waiting on language then?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, we are waiting on a request for it. "Like to have it," you know, we would like to have a lot of things, I suppose. But, you know, if he is requesting that, I think that he will make it clear that he is requesting, consistent with his commitment at the G-20, such sum.

Q Mr. Leader, as you know, the credit card people are meeting at the White House tomorrow. Are you convinced that legislation is actually necessary now if there is some voluntary changes and the administration is making some changes?

And the second part of that is the effectiveness of whatever

you might pass. There has been some criticism that it doesn't go into effect quickly enough to address some of the concerns.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, it is never too late to do the right thing, in terms of going into effect quickly enough. I think the hearings that the committee has had have clearly indicated that there are some practices which are not fair to consumers which need to be changed. And that is what this bill does.

In terms of the meeting with the administration, my experience has been people, before they think some legislation is going to pass, say, "Well, no, we will correct these on our own." I think, frankly, that what the bill sets forth are issues which adopt policies which ought to be permanent and ought to be in law. So, from that standpoint, I think that, you know, we would move ahead with the legislation.

I would think that if the -- I would hope the industries would support these as policies good for consumers and good for them, where they will still make good profits but will treat consumers fairly and will not change the rules in midstream or bill for interest charges that effectively are either on the most expensive interest, as opposed to paying off the most expensive interest first. If you are familiar, that is one of the parts of the bill.

Q Would you be comfortable if whatever passes moves up the date of effect, when this goes into effect?

Mr. Hoyer. Off the top of my head, I am not sure what the

date --

Staff. Right now the reported bill is 12 months from the date of passage or the Federal rules will go into effect.

Mr. Hoyer. Would I be comfortable in accelerating that? Yeah. But I don't want to accelerate it to an extent that it is not possible for the companies to comply fully in a reasonable time frame, because it will require some adjustments in their computer operations and other things.

Q Mr. Leader, you did set a date in terms of the D.C. voting rights bill of Memorial Day. Has anything transpired in terms of the gun amendments? And will there be a time when you will just have to say to Congresswoman Norton, this is the best we can do, this is the year we have to do it, and the gun amendments which are injurious to the citizens of the District of Columbia will just have to stay?

Mr. Hoyer. Now, your first question was, has something changed in my expectations and hopes? And the answer to that is no.

With respect to the balance of your question, we are still working on that. You know, this is a very difficult issue, obviously, that we are trying to deal with. And we are trying to deal with it in a way that effects the biggest objective that we want, and that is to enfranchise the 600,000 citizens of the United States who happen to live in the District of Columbia who don't have a voting Member, which I think is an egregious hole in

the integrity of our democracy.

So that is -- I keep stating that is the objective. We are having to deal with, sort of, the periphery of that central objective, which you refer to. And we are working on that, and we have been working on it right through the break, and we are continuing to work on it. And I don't want to say that we have made progress, because I don't know that that would be accurate. But we certainly are -- I spend time talking to a lot of people.

Q Do you think that if the gun amendment stayed on the bill and that was the only way in which there could be a vote on the voting rights portion, the President would veto the bill?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know the answer to that question.

Staff. Last question.

Mr. Hoyer. Mark, I haven't gotten an answer to that question. I want to be honest with you. I don't have the answer to that question.

Q Do you think there should be an investigation of wiretapping of Members of Congress?

Mr. Hoyer. I want to find more facts about what is going on here before I answer that question. But, certainly, I want you to know that the stories that I have read give me great concern. And I am going to be in the process, personally, of finding out more about it and then, with the Speaker, determining what action, if any, needs to be taken.

I think the Justice Department needs to take this under

consideration, as well, and hopefully they are. And I may have some conversations with the Attorney General on that aspect of it.

Last question.

Q During the break, aides to Speaker Pelosi said she would like to see the creation of a commission to investigate what caused the Wall Street meltdown that triggered, fueled the recession. Is there any movement on that? Would you like to see some --

Mr. Hoyer. We had discussions about that yesterday, and I think that is being looked at by the Speaker's office, in particular. I think, I think -- I say this because it was said that he did -- that Senator Reid seemed to indicate some support for such a path as well. There is a bill in the Senate, Isakson and -- who is the Democrat?

Staff. Conrad.

Mr. Hoyer. Conrad and Isakson have a bill in the Senate. There is a bill, John Larson has a bill here in the House. There are some other bills, as well.

The bottom line is I think everybody wants to get to the bottom of why this happened. What were the failures of regulation? Was it regulatory negligence? Was it regulations were not sufficient? Were they not applied to some of the financial activities outside of the banking and insurance industries?

See, the banking and insurance, when you are dealing with

that, essentially operated all right. It was when you got to the shadow financial, shadow banking operation, that clearly AIG came on the rocks. But it seems to me that was the major failure. But, clearly, we need to get to the bottom of it so we can fix it and try to ensure that we don't allow this to happen again.

We had Sheila Bair talk to us last night. She gave some very interesting observations and made a very strong point about how all of these financial transactions ought to be regulated. There ought not to be financial, particularly very complex, very consequential actions that can be taken without significant regulation and constraints, because they have led to, obviously, a great meltdown in not only our economy but the international economy, as well.

Q Do you support, sir, creation of a commission? If not a commission, then what?

Mr. Hoyer. Yeah, I think a commission certainly could be useful. And my own view is that it would not supplant the continuing, ongoing work of the Banking Committee in the Senate or the Financial Services Committee in the House.

And, in fact, as you know, Congressman Frank and his committee are looking at regulatory reform. I expect regulatory reform legislation to be reported out of the committee in the near future.

So that I don't think this is a substitute for their actions, but a complement to it.

Thank you.

Q Do you expect it to happen, sir? Do you expect a commission to be formed?

Mr. Hoyer. Certainly we are moving in that direction.

Staff. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:01 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]