

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, July 24, 2007

11:35 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning. Thank you very much for being here.

The schedule, Tuesday, we are considering, as you know, the Transportation-HUD bill. We're going to complete consideration of that bill. We also have two bills under suspension which we will be considering.

We hope to complete the Treasury -- excuse me, the Transportation-HUD bill -- it used to be the Treasury bill. These old guys can't get with the new stuff -- the Transportation-HUD bill today, and then we'll go to Commerce-Justice.

As I told you, John Oliver is doing the Transportation-HUD bill as we speak. In case you didn't believe me, there it is, which we taped, of course, last night.

Commerce-Justice-Science bill will be on the floor following that. In addition, tomorrow we'll consider a suspension bill which will prohibit permanent bases in Iraq.

Thursday, the plan is to go to the farm bill under a rule; and then Friday we will be here, but we're not sure exactly what the schedule will be. It depends on what conference reports -- we're hoping the 9/11 conference report is ready. We'll have a disclosure bill which will go forward with a number of other pieces of legislation, which

are the word of conferences, percolating. So we have a lot of options that we have available for Friday or thereafter.

Today we believe is a very significant day in that we raise the minimum wage today after more than 10 years of having those who are working 40-hour weeks, working hard for themselves, their families and for their country -- they have been stuck in the mud for 10 years.

As all of you know, I, along with many others, have been trying to increase the minimum wage for at least 8 or 9 years. In fact, I successfully got an amendment last year on the Labor-Health bill. Unfortunately, the Labor-Health bill was not brought to the floor. It's the only appropriation bill not brought to the floor; and it was, in my opinion, because they knew, as we now found out, that the minimum wage would in fact garner a majority of the votes because a majority of the American public, overwhelming majority of American public, simply believed it's wrong to leave people working 40-hour weeks at or below the poverty level in the richest country on earth.

There are -- 79 percent of those who are going to be receiving an increase are adults, over 3 and a half million of them are parents, and these are families that are affected -- obviously expands the number -- 46 percent child-rearing families with affected workers rely solely on these earnings.

I did not watch the debate last night, but I understand the question was asked: Would you work for the minimum wage? There is nobody in this room who believes that they could survive a week on the minimum wage. "Survive" may overstate it a bit, but thinking about how a mom with a child tries to get by -- this is a \$28 a week raise. \$28 a week is not a great raise, but it is a step in the right direction and one-third of what will happen under this bill over the next 24 months.

Republicans have long talked about an opportunity society. The President had talked about an ownership society. I have made the observation that somebody working at 5.15 an hour is talking about survival, not opportunity and ownership.

SCHIP, we are working very hard on that. That's part of our security and reaching out to children and health care of our people. SCHIP obviously is designed to include an additional 3 million children above and beyond what we now cover in the SCHIP program. These are poor children who don't have -- they are not the poorest of children who are eligible for Medicaid, but they are either 200, 300 percent poverty level and families living and families who don't have health insurance. This will try to make sure that they have available health insurance, preventive health care.

We had a tragedy in my own district, as some of you

read, I'm sure, actually in Al Wynn's district down in Prince George's County where a young boy 12 years of age had a toothache, an infection in his tooth. His mom, obviously not knowledgeable and having access in the system, not aware, as probably none of us would be, as to the seriousness, went from here to there, couldn't get a dentist to treat her child's tooth; and her child died.

In the richest country on the face of the earth, it is absolutely unacceptable that we don't have a system that at least covers our children. This is an effort to do that. We don't get all the way there, but we do get a far piece.

We also will address the issue of compensation of docs under Medicare so we make sure the doctors continue to participate in Medicare, which is a program for seniors. It also will deal with rural hospitals and rural health care. That is a greater challenge than an urban or suburban area because of the lack of funds that are concentrated in rural areas by definition, therefore, the lack of availability of health care. So we will be working on that and hope, as I say, to have that on the floor next week along with the energy bill.

The President has said he will veto our SCHIP bill. In 2004, the President said this in the convention as he was seeking the votes of the American people to be reelected as President of the United States. At the convention he said

this, "America's children must also have a healthy start in life in a new term" -- that is the term he is currently in. "We will lead aggressive efforts to enroll millions of poor children who are eligible but not signed up for government health insurance programs. We will not allow a lack of attention and poor information to stand between these children and the health care they need." George W. Bush.

Did you pull it up behind me? You are all looking at it, so you can read it for yourselves. It is easy to say that in a political speech. It is easy to represent that to the American people, to families and to their children in a political speech in which you are seeking their votes. But then, just 2 years later, to say that they will veto -- that he will veto legislation which achieves the objectives he set forth for himself and for the Nation is inconsistent with his promise to the American people. We hope that he will change his mind.

Senator Grassley has said it is disappointing, even a little unbelievable, to hear talk about administration officials wanting to veto a legislative proposal they haven't seen yet. As a Republican leader under the committee's jurisdiction we have been working day and night to reach an agreement on children's health insurance legislation because it is imperative that this important program, which has helped so many children, be continued.

That was Senator Chuck Grassley and Senator Orrin Hatch in a press release, July 12, '07, just a week ago, a little over a week ago. So we are hopeful that the President would reconsider.

Lastly, quickly, when I went to the United Nations -- Illeana Ros-Lehtinen and I lead the same delegation. I think there were eight members who went with us to the United Nations yesterday. We met with the Secretary General. We met with permanent representatives from China and Egypt. We met with the Assistant Secretary for Humanitarian Concerns dealing with Darfur and Jane Lute, who is his assistant. And her husband, by the way, is the -- she is a former military officer herself; and her husband is now the Iraq Czar, General Lute.

In any event, we met with them to impress upon them that, although they needed no notice from us, that the situation in Darfur remains critical and the world's response remains inadequate. Not only did we go to Darfur, which was my first trip as majority leader, as you know, but we intend to continue to follow up on this until the international community responds in a way that will save people from starvation and death and try to stabilize that very troubled part of the world.

Questions?

Q The energy bill, would that be both of the two

packages? The Ways and Means package and the rest of the package is going -- is that right?

Mr. Hoyer. That's our expectation.

Q Okay.

Mr. Hoyer. But when I answer that question, I don't want to necessarily adopt your premise -- we've been going back and forth on how this will be structured, but, yes, the answer is both components. I didn't want to mean that I meant it would be two bills. It may be two bills married together. It may be one bill.

Q How certain are you that you're going to bring the SCHIP package to the floor next week? And if it doesn't come up, what are we to read into that?

Mr. Hoyer. One of the things that I have learned in the certitude with which I have asserted things since being majority leader is that, Hoyer, you ought not to be quite so certain of what you say, because it's not always easy to make happen. Clearly, this has been a matter under discussion. We have done -- we have a press conference tomorrow on fiscal responsibility.

It is easy, as President Bush did, to say you're going to do things. The tough thing is paying for them. The tough thing is saying we are going to responsibly pursue these objectives and not just put them on the credit card which the kids of the Nation will have to pay for at some

time in the future. So we've been having some serious discussions about how you pay for what we want to do on SCHIP. You know that. Everybody in the room knows it.

Q How intense has the opposition been?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't think the opposition has been that intense from my perspective, Chris. I think the discussions have been intense about what people think they can support and will support. I think the discussion is caucus wide.

Q Is the issue how much of a tobacco tax to impose or whether to impose a tobacco tax at all?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I think it is how much more than whether.

Q What about the Medicare Advantage part?

Mr. Hoyer. And I think that Medicare -- I'm glad you followed up. It is not just the tobacco tax that's under discussion for Medicare Advantage. I think nobody -- everybody wants to ensure that seniors are not disadvantaged by any impact on Medicare Advantage. I think we are pretty confident that that won't be the case; and, in fact, the bill will address that issue or at least the committee is addressing it now. I don't want to anticipate what bill has been marked up. But --

So the discussion is broader than just the cigarette tax, Medicare Advantage; and there will be probably some other, smaller pay-fors as well in there. Because we have

adopted pay-for because we think that's appropriate; and, unlike the prescription drug bill, which was they put a figure out in the air which ultimately bore no relationship to reality, we don't intend to do that.

Q To follow up on that, this quote that you have from President Bush where he says, enroll millions of poor children who are eligible but not signed up for government health insurance programs. Aren't you talking about getting children into programs who are currently ineligible? So where is the inconsistency?

Mr. Hoyer. No, no, no, no. We have -- there are some children who are ineligible that we were talking about that we would like to add, but there are millions of children who are eligible who are not enrolled. So, no, we're talking about essentially enrolling those who are eligible, just as the President indicated.

Q So you probably will have votes on Friday if you get the 9/11 conference report?

Mr. Hoyer. My expectation is we will have votes on Friday.

Q And you're going to wait for the Senate --

Mr. Hoyer. We are scheduled for late Friday; and we have a lot of work, as you can tell, that we want to get done before next -- a week from Friday.

Q But you're going to wait until the Senate does the

9/11 conference before you --

Mr. Hoyer. Well, yes, we can't -- we can't do the conference report until the Senate does the conference.

Q Do you think that these provisions will be in the 9/11 bill? Protection, civil liberties, civil suits, people, will the Democrats -- will that make it into the 9/11 bill?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know the answer to that question. I know what you're talking about, and whether or not -- in the last two or three discussions I had on 9/11, how we are getting to conferences, to report on the floor, I don't know that that has been brought up. Maybe somebody else knows. I don't know the specific answer to that question, where that stands vis-a-vis the 9/11 conference.

Q Can you explain -- can you tell us a little bit more about the Barbara Lee -- the --

Mr. Hoyer. Barbara Lee fits the bill.

Q How is it different than --

Mr. Hoyer. It is not necessarily different. We've done this before. We're going to redo it to -- it is not law. We haven't got it into the law yet.

Q Did you say you are bringing that up under suspension?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes. It's passed on voice vote one -- one time we passed it. We don't believe there's controversy.

We believe if it has a role call vote we believe this will garner well over the votes necessary to pass suspension.

Q Does this get you closer to pressuring the administration to change course in Iraq by passing the no permanent basis bill into the law?

Mr. Hoyer. Not per se, no, but I think what it does is and what we've been attempting to do is to make it very clear that this is an issue which we believe we care deeply about, the American public cares deeply about, and we want to continue to focus on it on a regular basis. So it is not just, well, we did something, it did not succeed and therefore we're giving up. We're going to continue in large and small steps to address the redeployment and change the policy.

Q What if the energy bill doesn't come up next week? What would be the reason? And what CAFE proposal is House Democratic leadership lining up behind?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, with respect to if the energy bill doesn't come up, and I don't -- I do expect it to come up, and I expect it to incorporate essentially that which was announced June 27th, 28th, whatever, that last date we were here where we had the committee chairmen announce that that's what I expect it to include. As I told you last week, my expectation is that CAFE will be addressed at a later date and time, but I think CAFE will undoubtedly be

addressed. And as I said earlier, CAFE -- a CAFE provision will be in any bill that's sent to the President.

Q Just to clarify "at a later date," so you mean not before recess?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes. As I said, when the energy package was announced in the eight or nine committees that met there, that was not the subject. What I expect to be the subject of our energy bill is that which was discussed in that press conference.

Q Do you expect the CAFE to go in conference like you said in December?

Mr. Hoyer. That's certainly an option, or if we can deal with it in September. So there are a number of options. I don't want to preclude our options, but the answer is yes to either option is possible.

Q So you talk about the Barbara Lee getting back to Iraq for a second --

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

Q -- and you want the actual progress and have some legislative achievement in that end. If that's the case, why is there such hesitation from the leadership regarding the Abercrombie and Tanner proposal which is what I know progressives seem to be hesitant to support it, and leadership as well?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, Abercrombie and Tanner is being

considered in committees. As you know, that is an option. We have a number of options available to us, including Webb. I think most of us believe that Senator Webb's proposal is one that would garner a comfortable majority here. So that's the Abercrombie and Tanner option. So we are considering other options as well.

Q For next week?

Mr. Hoyer. I don't want to put us in terms of time, but --

Q Are political calculations more in play than legislative achievements in terms of Iraq?

Mr. Hoyer. We want to achieve legislatively a change in policy in Iraq and redeployment of our troops. I think we've made that hopefully very, very clear; and we have made repeated efforts to accomplish that objective.

We are not -- I'm mindful of the fact we have been unsuccessful to date in getting that done, A, because we can't override a veto, B, because the Senate has made it very difficult to proceed to a vote on substantive issues, but I think we are proceeding on both tracks. We agree with what we are proposing on a policy track and from the politics of it we want to keep this issue very much in the minds of American public so they can convey to our Republican colleagues that they want to see movement.

We -- I joked ironically last time that we doubled the

number of Republicans we got on our last redeployment vote from two to four. That's obviously not sufficient. We need to go from, you know 50, 60, 70.

Q Then why aren't greater efforts being made to reach across the aisle?

Mr. Hoyer. I'm not sure your assumption is correct that --

Q Several Republicans are saying they are willing to back a bill of rights done on a bipartisan effort, saying they have not been reached out to by leadership.

Mr. Hoyer. I'm not sure who those are.

Q Mr. English, for instance.

Mr. Hoyer. I have not talked to Mr. English so he may be correct. He's on the Ways and Means Committee. That does not mean -- I'm sure that's not a daily discussion at the Ways and Means Committee. But if Mr. English has got some proposals or thoughts on what he could support -- I know he expressed publicly his concerns and doubts about the current course in Iraq and that he's open to changing course, as have a number of Members of the United States Senate. Unfortunately, when we come to vote, they don't all vote to support changes in policy that they rhetorically indicated that they might support.

Q This morning at the Republican Caucus, McCrery said that the new people you want to enroll into SCHIPS, it will

be so that families making 85 to \$100,000 will be able to put their children in the SCHIP program; is that true?

Mr. Hoyer. The cap is set by the States. The bill -- I don't off the top of my head know the cap. You know, we have a 200 percent cap, 200 percent of poverty. That is certainly less than \$85,000. Some States, New York, for instance -- I think New York has up to a 400 percent.

The way the SCHIP program works, as I understand it -- I'm not an expert on the SCHIP -- is States get an allocation. States have the flexibility within that allocation to do a number of things. Number one is to set the level of eligibility.

Two hundred percent is the Federal floor, I believe; and then I think Maryland and New Jersey and others have between 200 and 400 percent. I think New York is maybe the highest. Now whether or not 400 percent of poverty in New York City gets you to those figures, I don't know. I don't want to say McCrery is wrong on that, but I'd have to see that. That's how it figured so New York does not get more money as a State than the State of West Virginia or Maryland or some other State. What it gets is to make a determination to how you allocate it. Obviously, to the extent that you are more generous in the allocation up, you limit the dollars you have to spread abroad.

Q You spent quite a bit of time in the minority over

the past 12 years --

Mr. Hoyer. Too much time.

Q Now that the shoe is on the other foot, how do you think the Republicans are handling it? How do you think Mr. Boehner is doing?

Mr. Hoyer. I hope I brought it in here.

Q You have talking points on this?

Mr. Hoyer. One of the things that the Congress has to do is pass appropriation bills to keep the government working and to set our priorities. Mr. Boehner and I spent some time discussing, as all of you know, agreeing to time constraints. We are now -- we have spent on eight appropriation bills -- seven, excuse me -- seven appropriation bills, 52 hours and some odd minutes -- I don't have the additional sheet that I just did -- more than we spent last year. In an election year, we were the minority, and we had to give unanimous consent.

Q Does that mean they don't care about earmarks? I don't mean to be joking.

Mr. Hoyer. Have you watched the votes?

Q No, no, no.

Mr. Hoyer. I want to answer this seriously.

First of all, Jeff Flake's quote is that we adopted the most transparent earmark reforms that have been adopted in the Congress since I've been here, number one.

Number two, we have the dollar amount of earmarks -- this crowd came into office beating their chest about fiscal responsibility and earmarks, quadrupled earmarks and took us from \$5.6 trillion surplus to a \$3 trillion deficit. That is hypocrisy run amuck.

You've seen the votes. We've had votes. These have not been close votes. These have not been 218 to 215 votes. These have been 250, 260, 270 to 170 votes. These are not close votes. This is demagoguery. This is wasting time that we could be addressing critical issues to make political points. That is being done in the Senate. It is being done in the House. It is delay for delay's sake and for politics.

Q Are they making any headway doing that with their base or with the American public. Do you think?

Mr. Hoyer. I think the American public -- the headway they are making is they are frustrating the American public, and the polling numbers reflect the American public's frustration -- that's probably the kindest word to be applied to this, "frustration" -- at the Congress's actions.

Q So you think it is a bad idea to spend that much time on the appropriation bill?

Mr. Hoyer. I think we ought to spend the time appropriate to consider substantively the issues raised in appropriation bills. I think we did that last year. We had

every intention of raising substantive issues. We did that, but we did it within time constraints that allowed the other business of the house to be done, I'm not very pleased with how long we have taken, 52 hours, additional hours.

Q -- where the Senate stands in November. Do you see similar expectations of the House?

Mr. Hoyer. I'm trying to get through August 3rd.

Q Can you handicap at all what the likelihood of seeing the SCHIP on the floor next week would be? Any --

Mr. Hoyer. I think it is likely.

Q How about the defense appropriation bill?

Mr. Hoyer. That's going to be on the floor.

Q Do you personally get on okay?

Mr. Hoyer. Yes.

[Whereupon, at 12:02 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]