

The erosion of leadership

Throughout most of the 20th century, the job of congressman was considered a lifetime profession. Members of Congress either died in office, after long and apparently faithful representation of their constituents, or they were voted out. That has changed, and with it Congress has changed.

Forty-three congressmen and senators are voluntarily leaving Congress this year. Two years ago, 50 retired and in 1976, 57 left. This means that over a period of four years, 159 congressmen—over one-third—have voluntarily left Congress, exclusive of departures forced by electoral defeats. During the previous two decades, the average departure rate was barely above 30.

As a result of those resignations, and of the liberal Democratic sweep in the post-Watergate 1974 election, when the 96th Congress opened in January 1979, 220 members of the House of Representatives had served in the House for *four years or less*—over half the entire membership. After the 1980 election, the figure will probably be over 60 percent. In 1971, 20 percent of the House had served at least 10 terms in the House.

The average age of members of Congress has dropped to below 50-years-old for the first time since World War II. In 1951, the average age of a member of the House was 52 years old; the average age of a senator was 58.5 years old.

Not only are the congressmen younger and less senior, but they have less precongressional political experience.

How this demographic upheaval has affected the Congress becomes clearest when one looks at the House of Representatives in 1970 compared with today, and at the enormous changes in the power structure of the House.

There is only one major House committee chairman serving today in the 96th Congress who was a committee chairman in 1970: Harley Staggers (D-W.Va.), chairman of the House Interstate and Commerce Committee. Staggers is retiring this November, meaning that the 1980 session will be without a major single point of continuity.

Even more remarkable is what has happened to the line of succession in the major committees. One

could assume that many former second- and third-ranking members of the committee would serve as committee chairmen today. Yet only *one* second-ranking member of a 1970 committee, Foreign Affairs Committee chairman Clement Zablocki (D-Wis.) has actually made the succession. Not one of the rest of those number-two men on the 1970 committees is even in Congress today (see box, page 45).

Of the number-three men on those 1970 committees, only three have become committee chairmen—Jamie Whitten of Appropriations, Frank Thompson of House Administration (over Watergated Wayne Hays), and Peter Rodino of Judiciary, replacing Emmanuel Celler, who lost a close and suspicious primary fight to Elizabeth Holtzman in 1974. Ironically, both Thompson and, less directly, Rodino are currently under the shadow of Abscam, as their accumulated power and constituency clout make them fair prey.

The House leadership itself reflects similar dislocations, as the line of succession was disrupted twice this decade—once by the death of Majority Whip Hale Boggs in a mysterious plane crash in 1971, and again by the Koreagating of then Majority Whip John McFall in 1978. Had he lived, Boggs would be Speaker of the House today, and McFall its Majority Leader.

Synonymous with the power of committee chairmen 10 years ago was the power of key regional voting blocs, most notably Texas and the Deep South, and labor-based northern urban machines. In 1970, Texas representatives held the chairmanships of the powerful Agriculture, Appropriations, and Banking Committees. Today, only Government Affairs chairman Jack Brooks remains as a reminder of former Texas clout. The South's power, with Rivers of South Carolina at Armed Services, Colmer of Mississippi at Rules, and Mills of Arkansas at Ways and Means was legendary.

Between 1958 and 1968, the South never controlled fewer than half of the House standing committees. In 1968, nine of the Senate's 16 standing committees, including all the major ones, were headed by Southerners. Old-line Democratic machines in Maryland, New York, and Pennsylvania produced the 1970 chairmen of the House Administration, Judiciary, Merchant Marine, Public Works, and Foreign Affairs Committees. Today, Abscammed John Murphy of New York is all that is left of those states' hold on major committees.