

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Senate Dems Counter GOP Welfare Reform Bill

On May 23, Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) and other Democratic senators proposed a welfare reform package, to be taken up by the Senate Finance Committee. Wellstone called the bill passed by the House on May 16 “harsh and punitive,” because it “undercuts the efforts of some of the best performing states which want flexibility to be able to provide people with training and education so that they can get out of poverty, so they can support their children.” He described it as a “one-size-fits-all effort” which seems to have as its goal to keep people busy for 40 hours per week. “It now falls to the Senate,” he said, “to write a TANF [Temporary Assistance to Needy Families] reauthorization bill that demonstrates genuine compassion and focuses on real reform by providing families with services and the supports they need to move out of welfare and out of poverty.”

Wellstone’s package has five parts. The first would increase funding for education and training. The second would increase access to child care, transportation, wage subsidies, and job training. Wellstone said that \$11.25 billion is needed for child-care over the next five years, whereas the House bill provides only about \$1 billion. The third part would provide support for families struggling against domestic violence, mental illness, substance abuse, and similar types of problems. The fourth would ensure that TANF recipients enjoy the same workplace protections that others have, and the fifth would reverse the cutoff of benefits to legal immigrants that was part of the 1996 legislation.

Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) said, “Americans want to work, but we cannot throw workers into low-wage, dead-end jobs and expect them to support their families. We cannot force workers into jobs for which they have

no skills and expect them to succeed.” While welfare roles have declined since the 1996 reform, “over 31 million Americans, including 12 million children, continue to live in poverty.” But Democrats in Congress are not challenging the underlying premise of the 1996 bill; that poverty is the result of people’s behavior, rather than of failure of national economic policy.

Debt Limit Poisons Debate on Supplemental

The question of whether to increase the statutory debt limit by \$750 billion, took over the House debate on the FY 2002 supplemental appropriations bill. The debate, over May 22-24, was characterized by charges and countercharges of fiscal irresponsibility. The source of the bitterness was not the bill, but what happened to it once it was taken up by the Rules Committee.

The bill went into the Rules Committee as a \$29.4 billion (later revised downwards to \$28.8 billion) straight appropriations bill to address military and homeland security requirements, plus \$5.5 billion for disaster recovery for New York City. It left the committee with the debt limit provision and a provision “deeming” the FY 2003 budget resolution to be a conference report on the presumption that the Senate will not pass a budget resolution.

Democrats were livid when the rule came out. Rep. Martin Frost (D-Tex.) said that the rule “uses a war on terrorism as cover to take care of as many political problems as they can think of.” Democrats charged that the rule was designed so that Republicans would not have to go on record as supporting the debt limit increase.

The rule narrowly passed by a vote of 216 to 209, and the bill passed by a vote of 280 to 138. The debate was

bitter. At one point, when Republicans objected to their assertions being questioned by Democrats, David Obey (D-Wisc.) said that it appeared the GOP tactic was to make “erroneous statements that have nothing whatsoever to do with the truth, and then refuse to debate the issue by yielding time.”

The Senate has agreed to take up its version of the supplemental on June 3.

Minimum Wage Increase Backed by Democrats

On May 22, Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) sought unanimous consent for the Senate to take up an increase in the minimum wage by June 24. The bill, sponsored by Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), would increase the minimum wage by \$1.50 per hour over two years from the current \$5.15 per hour.

Kennedy told the Senate that it has been six years since the last increase in the minimum wage, and the purchasing power of the minimum wage has fallen by 12% during that time. “The current minimum wage,” he said, “does not provide enough income to allow full-time workers to afford adequate housing in any area of the country.” Daschle added, “How ironic it would be if in the same Congress that passed tax breaks for those at the very top, tax breaks worth \$50,000 a year to those in the top 1%, we could not do something to address the needs of those at the lowest end of the income scale.

Daschle’s suggestion was objected to by someone who has spared no effort to provide breaks to those at the highest income levels—Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.). Gramm claimed that the number of children in poverty has declined by 20% in the last six years, without an increase in the mini-

mum wage. He said the trade bill is “more important to working people making low incomes than any minimum wage law that has ever been adopted by any legislative body in history.” He also said that the minimum wage, “by setting artificially high wages, . . . prevents people from getting their foot on the first rung of the economic ladder.”

Kennedy accused Gramm of treating his bill as if it were an amendment to the trade bill. “As I understand his comments,” Kennedy said, Gramm “is prepared to debate it, but he is going to object to any consideration to give the Senate . . . an opportunity to act on it before the July recess.”

Daschle Wants Panel To Investigate Sept. 11

On May 24, Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) told reporters that he hopes to move legislation to establish a commission to investigate intelligence failures leading to the Sept. 11 attacks, sometime after the Memorial Day recess. He said that the most recent news of a Minnesota-based FBI agent claiming that there was a lot of information sent to FBI headquarters that was ignored, is yet another example of the need for a commission.

The question is: How many Republicans will support establishing a commission? The GOP leadership in both Houses is opposed, but Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) joined with Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) to co-sponsor the bill. Daschle said, “If we can get the requisite number of Republicans to get this legislation through the Senate, I intend to do it.”

Meanwhile, a joint investigation by the Intelligence Committees of the House and Senate is moving ahead. Less than an hour after Daschle made

his remarks, Bob Graham (D-Fla.) and Porter Goss (R-Fla.), the chairmen of the Senate and House Intelligence Committees, respectively, announced that they plan to begin hearings on June 4 and continue them through the Summer. The hearings will be closed at first, but Graham said he expects the first open hearing during the last week of June. According to Graham, the 23 staff members involved in the investigation have already conducted 175 interviews and collected 30,000 documents.

Neither Graham nor Goss were put off by Daschle’s announcement. Graham said, “We are going to carry out our responsibility to do overview of the intelligence community.” Goss added, “We are not in any way being deflected from our main mission.”

Border Security Bill Raises Constitutional Concerns

On May 22, the House passed, by a vote of 327 to 101, a bill to strengthen border security against possible terrorist attacks. While the bill, in the form of an authorization for the U.S. Customs Service, addresses the full operations and organization of the Customs Service, it has two provisions that caused problems for Democrats. One would give immunity from liability to Customs officers for searches of persons “carried out in good faith.” Another would allow Customs to search mail going out of the country, an authority they now do not have.

Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) warned that the first provision was a violation of the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. “In our fight against terrorism,” he said, “we must make certain that we do not do damage to the principles of civil rights and certainly not do damage to the Constitutional rights of American citizens.” The

Democratic substitute, which would have overturned both provisions, was defeated by a vote of 231 to 197.

Bioterrorism Bill Ready For Bush’s Signature

On May 23, the Senate passed, by voice vote, the conference report on a bill originally co-sponsored by Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), and in the House by Billy Tauzin (R-La.) and John Dingell (D-Mich.).

The bill, which passed the House on a 425 to 1 vote the day before, provides for improved coordination and communications among Federal, state, and local public health officials; provides grants for education and training of emergency services personnel and bioterrorism preparedness for hospitals; tightens controls on biological agents used in research; strengthens the Food and Drug Administration’s ability to protect against biological agents being introduced into the food supply; and enhances security of drinking water systems.

The bill arises from recognition, in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks and the anthrax scare that followed, that the public health system is woefully unprepared to deal with any kind of major disease outbreak. Rep. John Shimkus (R-Ill.) noted that the anthrax attacks, “though small in scale . . . strained the public health system and raised concern that the nation is insufficiently prepared to respond to bioterrorist attacks.” In the Senate, Kennedy said, “Too many hospitals, crippled by savage cutbacks in their funding under Medicare and Medicaid, cannot make the investments needed to prepare for bioterrorism.”

The bill is intended to address these concerns, but provides only \$4.6 billion in funding.