

THE WAXMAN CHALLENGE TO DINGELL

Two of my favorite Congressmen—my own representative, John Dingell, and the current Chair of the Oversight Committee, Henry Waxman—are in a fight over the Chair of the powerful Commerce Committee, which John Dingell currently chairs. Here are some thoughts:

Two Good Chairmen

Understand, this is ideological and political, not functional. That is, this is a fight between two of the most effective Chairmen in the House.

Several Washington sources said they were puzzled by Waxman's challenge because the committee had run smoothly in recent years, steadily producing complex bills. Committee chairmanships usually go to the member who has served the longest, although junior members have pulled upsets in cases where a chairman was clearly ineffective.

Dingell has been recovering from knee replacement surgery last month after spending much of the past year on crutches, sometimes moving slowly and in visible pain around the Capitol. But Dingell, first elected in 1955, has shown few other signs of age.

"He's sharper than most members on his bad days," Stupak said.

Yeah, Stupak is an incredibly close Dingell ally, but as someone who speaks with Dingell regularly, I can attest that he's very sharp. There are committees out there—some pretty important ones—that would benefit mightily from having more competent Democratic leadership, but Commerce is not one of them.

So frankly, I'm more concerned about the absence

of a strong leader on Oversight than I am whether Commerce will have an effective leader. Darrell Issa is set to take over Oversight for the Republicans and he can be a consummate pain in the ass; we need to have someone to counter Issa. And frankly, I want real oversight of the Obama administration, particularly of the proceedings of the Treasury bailout. If Waxman were to leave, the next most senior leader of any note (IMO) is Elijah Cummings or Dennis Kucinich. While Kucinich might actually be good at keeping the obnoxious Issa in line and the bailout money doing what it's supposed to, I doubt that leadership wants to give him a gavel.

Energy Issues and Climate Change

Waxman's challenge is, above all, an attempt to force more progressive legislation through Commerce on climate change and energy issues. As the chief ally of the American auto industry in Congress, Dingell has long fought any legislation that would make life more difficult on the auto industry, notably increased CAFE standards and air quality regulations.

But on this issue—even as a Michigander—I side with Waxman. Climate change and energy security are just too important to be subjugated to the short-sightedness of the incredibly short-sighted auto industry. Besides, faced with proactive climate regulation, auto companies are going to have to get more limber, which they're going to have to do anyway, if they want to survive. (Besides, they just got \$25 billion to ease this transition, so they've got some help doing so, thought it won't be enough.)

Health Care

Remarkably, in all the coverage of Waxman's challenge thus far, Waxman has said little about health care. Health care is almost as big a priority for an Obama administration as energy is, and in that area Dingell has the experience and the unremitting focus. Dingell has introduced legislation supporting universal healthcare for twenty-six Congresses in a row,

and this time around, with both Dingell and Kennedy fighting to implement their lifetime's legislative priority, it will become a reality. And Dingell has been a close ally with Kennedy on Medicare and other healthcare related issues.

To remove Dingell from his oversight of these healthcare issues at this point in time is both unwise strategically and downright churlish, it seems to me.

A Non-Financial Economy

The healthcare issue moves the discussion to where I believe this issue should be decided—and thus far it's an area where Waxman has been totally silent.

Healthcare is a necessity, now above all others, because without it we cannot be competitive internationally. If we don't get Americans healthcare, we will continue to face a disadvantage when competing against companies operating in countries that have healthcare.

But I'm just as interested in all the subjects within Commerce's jurisdiction that should play a central role in responding to the economic crisis: telecommunications infrastructure (which also impacts much of the media), food and consumer product inspection, biomedical regulation, travel, and FTC, among others. It is a committee that really ought to be at the center of an effort to rebuild our non-financial economy now that the risk of becoming so reliant on finance has been revealed. It should have a part in revitalizing manufacturing, healthcare, and some aspects of agriculture. It's an area Nancy Pelosi has largely left out of her response to the financial meltdown—which is almost as short-sighted as all those auto executives trying to put off a response to climate change (and note how centrally Pelosi put Oversight into her response to the economic meltdown, which was presumably not an accident).

We heard a lot about Main Street during this election—and much of the economic impacts to Main Street go right through this committee. I'd

like the discussion about this fight to include a close focus on what it will do for Main Street.

Nancy's Own Leadership

Nancy Pelosi is playing dumb about this challenge, pretending she had nothing to do with a close ally taking on one of her biggest antagonists.

And while her aides denied it, many saw Pelosi's hand in the stunning challenge to Dingell, the so-called Dean of the House who will become the longest serving member of the lower chamber in February.

Waxman is a key ally of Pelosi's, while Dingell has long been an obstacle to her. After redistricting, Pelosi backed then- Rep. Lynn Rivers (D-Mich.) over Dingell in 2002, but Dingell won.

Pelosi aides said she had no prior knowledge of the Waxman coup attempt.

"The idea that Waxman just popped out there with this, without discussing with Nancy Pelosi, is ridiculous," said a former Democratic aide.

I suppose I understand why Pelosi would pretend she has nothing to do with this. But consider how this challenge might raise questions about her own leadership.

I said above that Waxman and Dingell were two of the most effective Chairmen in the House. The same could not be said, thus far, for Pelosi's tenure as Speaker. She has failed to make headway on the key issue of the 2006 election, the war, and she has repeatedly gotten rolled by the more conservative members of her caucus.

To some degree, I see this challenge as an attempt by Pelosi loyalists to solidify her own position, to put more progressives in positions of leadership. But I wonder whether it's not

going to exacerbate some of the difficulties she has had keeping her more conservative lieutenants in line. I understand why she's presumably supporting this challenge, and believe the energy and climate related issues are really important, but I do wonder whether she has overplayed her hand.

Maybe this is why Rahm took so long to decide whether he wants to be White House Chief of Staff (he just accepted)—because Waxman's challenge may stir things up in the House more than he expected would happen.