

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER,

STENY H. HOYER

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Tuesday, September 8, 2009

11:32 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Welcome back.

I was just handed the -- I hope all of you have read E.J. Dionne's story, "The Real Town Hall Story." I am going to talk a little bit about that. But I hope you have read that because I think that, frankly, he is accurate in saying that the -- particularly the television media misrepresented the story, in terms of the context of what happened. And I will talk a little bit about that.

Obviously, we are back from a 6-week break. Clearly, as all of you have noted, a number of us have had a lot of town meetings. I think there were some 2,000 town meetings that have now been held around the country on this issue by Democrats. And we held more than a thousand of them in this past 6 weeks.

Let me go briefly down the schedule. You probably already know it. We meet at 2:00 p.m. The last vote is around 7:00. No votes until 6:30, doing suspension bills.

Wednesday we will obviously -- there will be a resolution sponsored by myself and Mr. Boehner regarding the terrorist attacks that occurred on 9/11, 2001, obviously memorializing those who lost their lives and expressing, as well, our resolve to ensure the safety of our people and our country. We also are going to recess early because there is going to be, as you know, the -- well, there will be a remembrance ceremony at 3:30 p.m.

At 8:00, we'll gather in joint session to receive an address

from the President. The address will be at 8:00 p.m., which is an hour earlier than the State of the Union.

And on Thursday, we expect to consider the "Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network Continuing Authorization Act." And we will not be meeting on Friday.

One of the things that we are hoping to do, obviously, is to have the appropriations process completed no later than the end of October. And I hope to complete a number of the bills prior to the end of the fiscal year on September 30th. We'll probably need a CR for the balance at some point in time during the last week or the next-to-last week in September so that we can get it over to the Senate.

I thought the district work period was a very productive one. It was obviously -- a great deal of interest was focused on it. Democracy is not always the process of sweetness and light. It is animated discussion. It has always been the case. All you have to do is read the press comments and the public comments with reference to -- not so much George Washington; he was probably the only one that really didn't get a lot of flak. All his successors have gotten much more flak than George Washington got. But debate was very animated on the great issues of the day.

And one of the great issues of our day is obviously how we ensure that every American has health care -- access to affordable, quality health care and health care they can count on. The debate will continue as we return. And the President's

discussion on Wednesday will be, obviously, a very, very important part of that debate.

In addition to health care, which I will refer to in greater length, there is a lot on the agenda: the appropriation bills, obviously; student loan reform, which will be a savings of \$87 billion, which we will devote to very substantially increasing the assistance we give to students.

When Pell grants were originally adopted, they paid about 70 percent of tuition costs for students, not room and board, but 70 percent. They are now down to the low 30s. And they were threatening to go below 30 percent until we took action over the last couple years.

We will also deal with regulatory reform. Clearly, one of the major issues that confront our country was the failure of the Bush Administration, and perhaps the Congress as well, to adequately provide for oversight and regulation of the financial sector of our economy. It got out of control. It did things that -- it incurred risks that were unsustainable. And, as a result, we have had to invest a lot in maintaining our economy so that it didn't fall into depression and to try to invest in bringing it back. In addition, as I said, to health care reform.

I've indicated that this was a challenging month for Members because when people are very concerned and animated, they want to be heard, they need to be heard. That's how a democracy works. And I don't know of a period that I have served in Congress where

I think more people have gotten more engaged in an issue than this one. We had a lot, as you know, Social Security forums all over the country, and we had a lot of them, but they were not attended by as many people, which I think is demonstrative of the fact that some 82 percent of the American public believes that changes are required. There is not a consensus, as you've seen, on exactly what those changes should be. But there is no doubt that there is consensus among the American people that change is needed.

Now, I've referred to E.J. Dionne's column. My own town meeting, I had some 1,500 people, actually 1,491, to be specific. We rounded at 1,500, which I hope is not too much license, 1,500 people.

For those of you who may have watched it either on TV -- I don't know whether any of you were there -- I think it is accurate to say that at least 60 percent of the people were proponents of health care reform.

That does not mean that they all agreed on one set of reforms. We did not do polling or questioning that precisely. But, clearly, I would say pretty close to two-thirds of the room, of the 1,500, were for some type of reform. Clearly, I think another probably 10, 15, 20 percent weren't sure but they were there to listen and to learn and to express their opinion. That's how our democracy works. And 10 to 15 percent were there to make their point and get on television, which they succeeded in doing.

But I think if you weren't there, you didn't get that

impression. You got the impression that the majority of the crowd was opposed to reform. Now, I say that because most of the Members that I have talked to reached a similar conclusion. And I have talked to a lot of Members over the past 6 weeks either on the telephone or I've been in their districts or traveled with them. And I think most of them are of the opinion that the majority of their constituents do believe that changes in our health care system are required.

The Speaker and I and others in the leadership will be spending a lot of time over the next couple of weeks listening to our Members, figuring out where our Members can go and want to go.

I expect President Obama to be, if not definitive, more specific than he's been. I have not talked to him about specifically what he is going to say or anybody in the White House specifically about what he is going to say. But I do believe that he is going to lay out for the American people and for Members of Congress where he thinks we ought to go.

Lastly, on bipartisanship, I know that Max Baucus continues to work on forging a bipartisan bill. I'm hopeful that he is successful. I would like to forge a bipartisan bill over here. My analysis is that that is not the desire of members of the committees. In fact, although I'm not going to mention specifically which committee, but one Ranking Member made it clear that his leadership had discussed with him a lack of interest in his pursuing with the chairman a bipartisan alternative.

Let me lastly say -- because Mr. Boehner keeps talking about, "Where are the jobs?" Since the economic stimulus bill -- which we call the "Recovery and Reinvestment" because it was to try to bring our economy back and then to reinvest and keeping it going and growing it -- since it passed, we have had a very, very substantial decline in the loss of jobs.

As I told you, I mentioned this figure before, the jobs lost from December to January were about 4 million, December of '07 to January of '09, were about 4 million. In the last 3 months, we have lost about less than a million. So, in this quarter, we've averaged a loss of 319,000 -- quarter I say, June, July, and August, August the most recent figures -- 216,000. And we've seen a decrease, substantial decrease, over the last 2 months. We've seen the stock market go up 1,500 points. We've seen housing starts go up.

We have not seen evidence that this is over, but every economist seems to believe that, in fact, we are seeing a stabilization and an improvement. That is progress. It is not progress as fast as we would like, but it is definitely progress and a sign, in my opinion, that the Recovery and Reinvestment Act is, in fact, having an effect.

Okay. Let me stop with that.

Q At your town hall meeting, you said you support the public option with or without any Republican votes. At this point, is the public option a must in any final bill?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I did say that because the question was posed, "Will you support a public option even if there are no Republicans for it?" And then my response was, yes, I support the public option. I believe the public option is an option, an option, a choice, an alternative that people ought to have which would enhance competition, bring prices down, and give people more choices. I think all of those are three worthy objectives.

Now, I have said, as you know, that while I am supportive of the public option, I think the bill, if you didn't have a public option, has much within it that is very good, moves us forward, enhances very substantially accessibility, expands greatly the number of people covered by insurance, and provides for very, very broadly supported insurance reforms, such as eliminating pre-existing condition, eliminating lifetime caps, capping annual out-of-pocket expenses for individuals. I think there are some very, very important pieces of this bill that will help small business, will help individuals, will help families.

I think the public option is a very good choice for consumers to have. But your question and what I said in the meeting was that, A, I would support the public option, do support the public option. My support of the public option is not contingent upon whether Republicans support it or whether X, Y, or Z support it. I think it is a good option. On the other hand, I have said that I hope we move a bill forward that can garner a majority of support.

Q It is not necessarily vital? It sounds like the public option is not vital to be in the bill that you would support.

Mr. Hoyer. No, I think it is vital. I think it is vitally important. Do I think it is a condition of passing the bill? My position has been: I'm for the public option, I want to see us adopt a public option, but I think there is a lot in the bill that is very good in addition to the public option. Interpreted, that means: If the public option weren't in there, I still could support a bill because I think there is a lot in there that is good.

Q Mr. Leader, do you think that the progressives, the Congressional Black Caucus, some of those more liberal groups in your caucus are being recalcitrant when it comes to a decision on the public option?

Mr. Hoyer. No, of course not.

Q Could it blow up the whole process?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, I hope we don't blow up the whole process. This is a robust, animated, important debate that we are having about how we put this together. Everybody knows how consequential it is to the American people and every one of their constituents. And, as a result, they are weighing in heavily on the options that they believe ought to be in this bill, the alternatives. I don't want to confuse the public option with alternatives that ought to be in the bill. And so I don't think anybody is being recalcitrant. I think they are being -- they are stating their

views, and they are stating them strongly.

Now, in the final analysis, we will have to come down to see what we can pass. And as I -- I don't know whether I said this -- no, I guess I didn't; I have said it to some. You know, we lost a great warrior for the American people, particularly those Americans most vulnerable, when we lost Senator Kennedy. Senator Kennedy was, I think, as strong a voice for a public option as there was in the country. I think Senator Kennedy has been a stronger voice for health care reform.

But Senator Kennedy, through the years, one of the reasons I think he was -- there were so many Republicans and Democrats who expressed great affection and admiration for Senator Kennedy was because he was a consummate legislator in trying to reach a consensus that could garner enough votes to change policy. That's what we are trying to do, and I hope that's what we do do.

Q Mr. Leader, could you talk about Congressman Ross, just your reaction, I mean, the fact that he is now saying he does not support a public option. And could that spell trouble when you are talking about other members of your party who do? How do you reconcile those two?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, the same way you reconcile any differences within a party or within the Congress or within the country. You try to come to agreement on what can garner a majority of support for a proposition.

I would reiterate, I believe this bill has many component

parts. I think they are all very important and will be good additions to our policy that assures access to affordable insurance -- well, affordable health care for all of our people.

So, it will have to be reconciled, and it will -- "reconciled" means a number of things. But I haven't talked to Congressman Ross, but I did hear his statement.

Q Do you worry others might follow suit as a result of the town halls?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, we'll see. You know, I think, again, I would reiterate, I think the public option is a -- and I said this in my town meeting, and, you know, I didn't get any great backlash, although I knew that there were people in the room who didn't support a public option.

Q Mr. Leader, when do you expect the House version of the bill to come to the floor? And are you now waiting for the Senate to act first?

Mr. Hoyer. No, I don't think we are going to -- we don't have a policy of waiting for the Senate to act first. I think there are a number of Members, including myself, who would like to know what the Senate is going to do.

You know, we've been talking about this for a long time now. I would reiterate that this has been a debate that has been ongoing in our country for decades, five at least, in terms of how we ought to provide affordable health care for all of our people. And certainly a very animated debate in the '90s has been, as

well. And George Bush himself said he thought we needed to make sure that every citizen had access to affordable health care -- the President, I mean the most recent George Bush. His father said the same thing.

But I don't have a timetable. And when I say I don't have a timetable, I indicated, as you know, for some period of time that I wanted to see a health care bill passed before August. It was clear that a lot of our Members and the American public wanted to take a closer look at this bill. Very frankly, I think they were correct. You know, the bill deals with a huge, critical segment of our economy and the quality of people's lives.

And I think August, to that extent, was a learning experience and a very useful one. Now we are coming back after we've listened to a lot of people and we have heard their concerns, and we need to now move forward with those concerns and advice and counsel in mind. So I don't want to put a date --

Q Are you saying that the bill is going to change then?

Mr. Hoyer. "The bill," there is no "the bill." There is no -- no, no, it is an important point. There is no "the bill." There is H.R. 3200, which was the base bill that the three committees acted on, but all of them changed that bill, and there is no "the bill" at this point in time.

That is an important point, and the reason it is an important point is because we have listened to a lot of people around the country. We are going to be coming together now and putting

together the bill that we'll bring to the floor.

Q Mr. Hoyer, the Speaker has said that she doesn't think a bill can pass the House without a public option. But given that you have some leading conservatives now walking away from the bill and some liberals, you know, saying that they might be open to compromise, do you think the bill can pass the House without a public option?

Mr. Hoyer. I think a bill can pass the House that the majority of the House believes enhances, moves forward substantially the providing of access to affordable, quality health care. I know that sounds like a litany to you, but -- and it is a litany. But the fact of the matter is, I believe a bill that accomplishes very substantially the objectives the President has put forward and we've put forward can pass the House.

Q Mr. Leader, President Obama comes to address Congress tomorrow night. The House already has three bills, separate bills on the table. Is he a little bit late publicly getting into this? And do you think it is going to have any effect on your Members?

Mr. Hoyer. I think the answer is -- I don't think he is late. After all, again, President Obama talked about this throughout the course of his presidential campaign, number one.

Number two, one of the first things he did was to convene -- not the first thing, but one of the first things he did was to convene a forum, in which he invited all of the stakeholders and representatives of the public into forums at the White House to

discuss this.

He then said to Congress, "Look, put together legislation which accomplishes the broad parameters of our objective," which I won't repeat the litany for you because you know it now by heart as well as I do. And that has been occurring for the last 8, 9 months since January -- since February.

Now he is coming to Congress and to the American people with a presentation on, "Look, this is what I told you I wanted to accomplish. You elected me. I have been working on accomplishing it. We have had a lot of work done. Five committees considering this; thousands of town halls, literally, around the country; much public input. Here is what" -- my presumption is what he is -- "here is where I think we are, and here is where I think we ought to go." I think that is useful, and it is always timely to do that. The legislative process is not a sort of a light switch; it is a continuum.

And I think this will be a very useful, timely presentation by the President. And I think it will be helpful. I think it will be helpful to the American people. Hopefully there is going to be a large viewership of this and they will listen to what he has to say. After all, they elected him with a very substantial majority, and he has done exactly what he said he wanted to do. It is not like this is something new that he has come up with over the last few months.

Q Can you explain the process, Mr. Leader, moving forward?

You say that there is no one definitive proposal. So are you going to give it back to the committee chairmen? Is the leadership going to write it? Are you going to allow the President some input in writing a bill?

Mr. Hoyer. We're not going to "allow" the President input. Under the Constitution of the United States, the President and our country -- just like everybody at the town meeting, he has the right to have input, and he is going to give input. As a matter of fact, he's got the biggest forum in America to give input, and he will give input. We'll consider that, obviously. And it will be an important part of our discussion.

And so I think the process is as you know it. We will now consider what the three different committees have done. Staff has been working on that over the last 6 weeks to see where there are consistencies, where there are inconsistencies, where differences have to be resolved. Leadership and committees will be involved in that, as will the caucus be involved in that.

Q Mr. Leader, will you take a question on Afghanistan really quickly?

Mr. Hoyer. Let me -- I pointed to him. Then I'll have you, and then we'll leave.

Q Before we move on, in your discussions with Members as you try and craft these three bills into one, I mean, has the idea of scrapping or modifying the public option come up? And, if so, what is the reaction to it from them? I mean, is it largely

negative, largely positive? Are you getting --

Mr. Hoyer. I don't know that I would characterize on the public option itself. Most of my discussions with Members -- and I have talked to a large number. I don't know the exact number, but a very significant number. And I have been with Members in tough districts over the last 3 weeks, in five or six or seven States -- I guess six States.

I think I would characterize it as, A, Members believe that health care reform is an important item that we continue to focus on our agenda and act on. I don't think Members have -- I think Members' experience at their town halls have been much like mine, that a significant number of -- who did I read that had 14 town meetings and that's what he said? I forget which Member it was.

But, in any event, they found that the public -- that the polls that reflect 82 percent say, look, we need reform -- that was the CBS poll on September 1st -- are accurate, from their own sense, from their own sort of focus-group experience, in town meetings, in grocery stores, in hardware stores, in 7-Elevens, all over -- Rotary Club meetings. That's been their experience.

And I think they will bring that back to the debate in terms of what can be passed, what can garner a majority of support. You know, it is very nice to talk about in legislative terms what you would like to do. But what is important and what will change lives in America is what you can do.

Q I just wondered if you could discuss --

Mr. Hoyer. This will be the last question. I know that you had your hand up, but --

Q -- your sense of Member support for possibly putting new or additional boots on the ground in Afghanistan. You've heard the McChrystal report. Whether or not you have been briefed on the --

Mr. Hoyer. I have not been briefed on that yet. And I want to see the plan. I think Members will want to see what plan is available.

I think Members largely believe that the President was accurate and we were accurate when we said, unfortunately, in '03 we took our eye off the ball in Afghanistan and we didn't finish the job that we set out to do, and, as a result, the job has become a lot tougher.

But the nexus of terrorism attacks on America came from Afghanistan, that the Taliban is resurgent and was resurgent starting in '07 and in '08, and that the President has made it very clear that he believes that, if we are going to fight terrorism, that is the venue to fight terrorism. But we want to see a plan that Members conclude can be successful.

Okay. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:04 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]