

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH MAJORITY LEADER

STENY H. HOYER

Tuesday, May 9, 2021

11:04 a.m.

Mr. Hoyer. Good morning, everybody. Thank you for being with us. Briefly on the schedule, and then I'll go into a little more detail on some of the things we're considering.

First of all, we're going to do the PRO Act, which is regarding the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively. We'll do the rule on that -- we did the rule, excuse me.

And we're going to also, I think, do the rule on the American Rescue Plan that's coming over from the Senate. We expect to receive it shortly. The Rules Committee will be on a hearing. We don't know how long that will last. And our expectation is that this afternoon -- maybe late this afternoon -- we would adopt the rule.

It's our thought that we will then, tomorrow, at 9 a.m., consider the American Rescue Plan and pass that and send it to the Senate [Mr. Hoyer misspoke. He meant to say once passed in the House, the bill will be sent to the President to be signed into law].

In addition to that, of course, we're going to do the universal background checks, H.R. 8, which we expect to do on Wednesday as well, with the Charleston loophole bill that [House Majority Whip] Jim Clyburn has sponsored. Both of those deal with gun safety in our communities. We'll debate those bills and amendments, and we expect to vote passage of those on Thursday.

So that is at least conceptually the schedule. Now, I say conceptually only because, again, we have not received the American Rescue Plan. But we do -- at least I don't think we have it, I haven't heard that we've received it -- but we do expect to be receiving it shortly.

The American Rescue Plan, of course, is an extraordinary piece of legislation that will have a major, major positive effect on our economy, on our families, on the delivery of vaccines, on the testing and tracing, on healthcare, generally, on getting back into

schools and getting money in people's pockets.

So, it will have a transformative impact. And we said we were going to pass it before March 14 when the enhanced unemployment loses authorization, and we will do just that.

This is a critical step to get our economy back on track and help families struggling because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the sixth bill we will have passed. As you know, we passed the first one on March 4, 415 to 2; the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, 363 to 40; the CARES Act in the House we passed by voice vote; on April 24, we passed the Paycheck Protection Program, which dealt with small businesses; and the Healthcare Enhancement Act, 388 to 5, 177 Republicans voting for, 140 -- 192 voting for the first bill.

And then we passed the, on December 21, just relatively recently, the omnibus with COVID-19 relief, 359 to 53, with 134 Republicans voting for it. And then we also passed the CASH Act as a result of Donald Trump saying that the \$600 was insufficient. So we passed the CASH Act on the \$1,400, which is included, of course, in this bill, and that passed 275 to 134, with 44 Republicans voting for it.

No Republicans are voting for it this time. Why? Because the President has changed. If Donald Trump were President and this bill were passing, it would receive a significant number of Republican votes, I don't know how many, but a very significant number.

But just as they did in 2009 when George Bush had left office, they voted for [the Troubled Asset Relief Program] -- some of them, about a third voted for it. When it was Obama as President they all voted no, a very partisan perspective, in my view.

This bill is a bill that is supported by the overwhelming majority of Americans, including the majority of Republicans. It helps struggling Americans with a \$1,400 direct

payment. It extends expanded emergency Unemployment Insurance. It's \$300, not \$400, but a very substantial supplement to the state unemployment.

It provides a 15 percent increase in food stamp benefits. We have a lot of Americans who never expected to be in a food line, had no idea they would ever need help putting food on their tables. They do now, and this speaks to that.

It also provides help for renters and homeowners. It allocates \$170 billion to help get kids back in school, get teachers back in school, and get them back in safely. It also helps -- part of that goes to help colleges get students back in the classroom safely as well.

It provides \$350 million -- billion dollars, I said million -- for states, local governments, territories, and Tribal governments, probably the most assistance that Native Americans have ever received, and this is appropriate because they've been hurt just as badly, if not worse, than others as well.

And it allocates \$20 billion in funding for vaccine distribution, as well as other money for research and testing and tracing. It includes \$7.5 billion for the CDC itself to set up vaccination sites. We're doing 2 million a day. We need to exceed that. And I would urge every American -- every American -- to take one of the three vaccines that is available to them.

CDC, Dr. Fauci, others, the medical community is almost united, if not united, on saying that any one of these vaccines is very, very helpful and will help America get to what we need to do, and that is herd immunity.

So we need to continue to wear masks, we need to continue to wash our hands, et cetera, et cetera. But we also need to get vaccine and do everything we can.

I know there's been a shortage. It's a frustration. In my district, every district, I'm sure, offices are getting the same kinds of calls: How can we do this? But we are

making progress.

In my own state, unfortunately, we are not making as good of progress as we ought to in terms of making sure that those most at risk in the minority communities are getting the most access to these vaccines, but that is being worked upon.

You heard that we did -- we had 13 suspension bills. We have postponed those 13 suspension bills. Some Republicans, not the Republican leadership, but some Republicans had threatened to ask for a vote on each one of those 13 bills, which would have taken some 10 hours of voting. Suspensions, frankly, [are the] one item that we have left that we have dealt with on a bipartisan basis, and I am working to try to maintain that.

Obviously, suspensions require two-thirds votes, which means that a broad spectrum of the House believes that these bills are in the best interest of either small groups, large groups, or the country itself, and we ought not to put those at risk.

Unfortunately, two of those bills that I -- that we had to postpone, one was a Congressional Gold Medal for Capitol Police and Metropolitan Police, and it's a shame that that was not passed.

I understand there is some issue with reflection to -- referring to this January 6 as an insurrection. You know, people want to ignore the truth. That was the truth. It was an insurrection, stopping the electoral process from moving forward and the Presidential race to be determined in a peaceful, democratic way, as has been our history. I don't know what one would call it other than an insurrection.

The other piece of legislation was the bill which will provide for the VA authority to have a broader opportunity to vaccinate veterans. What a shame. But I'm hopeful that we'll get those done in the near future.

Okay. That's it for me, and now I'll hear your questions.

Hello?

Staff. Thank you very much, Mr. Hoyer.

As a reminder, to ask a question, please press "5" at any time.

Our first question is from Lindsey McPherson at Roll Call.

Your line is now unmuted, and you may ask your question.

Q Hi, Leader Hoyer.

I wanted to ask, and you brought it up on the suspension bills, but my follow-up question is, is this going to be an issue in terms of having suspensions in the future?

It's not just the Republicans objecting to roll call votes. A week or two ago, we had Democrats who wanted roll call votes as well because of the sponsors of the bill were ones who voted against certifying the election, and it seems that there's been several issues with the suspension bills.

I was just wondering if you have any --

Mr. Hoyer. Right. Lindsey, I think you saw last week there were, what, six or seven, eight Democrats who voted against.

But it was my position then, it remains my position, the suspension calendar is really a bipartisan calendar, including bills that are priorities for Republicans and for Democrats. But what they share in common is both Democrats and Republicans feel they are good pieces of legislation and are helpful, as I said, for the country.

I don't think this, except in maybe one instance or so, had anything to do with the substance of the legislation. And I'm trying to work this out, and I've talked to the Minority Leader. He was unaware of the effort that was being made. I just called him. I haven't talked to him yet. But I'm hopeful that we'll work this out on suspensions.

We obviously have significant partisan differences. There's, you know, a lot of disagreement and anger and disappointment on both sides. But I am trying to preclude

that from adversely affecting a bipartisan procedure that works well, works efficiently to get legislation done that has broad bipartisan support. So the answer to your question is: I hope not.

Staff. Thank you, Mr. Hoyer.

As a reminder, to ask a question please press "5" at any time.

Our second question is Casey Wooten from the National Journal.

Your line is unmuted, and you may ask a question.

Q Hi, Leader Hoyer. I wanted to ask about the child tax credit expansion that's in this new COVID bill.

Mr. Hoyer. Right.

Q Should that be made permanent? We've heard some Members talk about advocating that. And, you know, if so, do you think that Democrats would advance a bill, doing so, you know, soon or more toward its expiration next year?

Mr. Hoyer. A) I think that this is good policy. This bill is projected to bring about half of the children who are now living in poverty out of poverty. What a wonderful thing to do for our country.

And the question you ask about the follow-on, making it permanent, I think there's a lot of sentiment to make this policy a policy that's ongoing to keep children out of poverty and to have more healthy children living in better conditions.

So, I don't -- I'm not going to speculate as to when such legislation may come up, but I don't think it will be immediately. I think there will be a lot of discussion about how that policy can be made permanent either in the form it's in now or in some modified form. But there's a lot of sentiment to do that, yes.

Staff. Thank you, Mr. Hoyer.

Our next question will be from Eliza Collins with The Wall Street Journal.

Q Hi.

Staff. Your line is now unmuted.

Q Hi, there.

I want to talk about the PRO Act. When it gets to the Senate, I mean, just with the 60-vote threshold it's unlikely to go anywhere. What do Democrats do to try to move the agenda forward without the filibuster requirement? I mean, are there conversations happening in the House?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, yes, there are conversations going on in the House, but this is largely, as you point out, a Senate issue. And I think it's going to depend upon, as we go along, as to how often that filibuster is used to undermine legislation which we think is supported by the overwhelming majority of the American people.

When I say overwhelming, 60 percent-plus of the American people, and, in many instances, supported by a majority of the Republicans.

The American Rescue Plan is supported, in the last poll that I saw, by 53 percent, one was as high as 60 percent of Republicans support the act, and the American people, over 70 percent support it.

So the filibuster is, I think, a device that has been used historically -- of course, most harmfully, to stop civil rights legislation and to stop the constitutional implementation of the results of the Emancipation Proclamation, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments.

And so, my experience it has been a very negative, it's had a very negative impact on the Senate and public policy in America.

And I personally would like to see the filibuster eliminated, not full and fair debate in the Senate eliminated, because I think that's what the Founders had in mind. But I don't think the Founders had in mind that a perpetual minority could stop the Senate

from acting. So, we'll see what the Senate does.

The PRO Act, by the way, we feel is a very good piece of legislation. We believe that ensuring that the workers in America have the right to bargain -- to organize and bargain collectively has been one of the most important facets in establishing a broad middle class, which has been the bulwark of the success of the American economy.

Staff. Thank you, Mr. Hoyer.

Mr. Hoyer. You're welcome.

Staff. Our next question is Alan Fram from the AP.

Alan, your line is now unmuted, and you may ask your question.

Q Hi, Mr. Leader.

Mr. Hoyer. Hi. How are you, Alan?

Q Good.

I know Democrats feel strongly that the way to respond to an economic downturn in a major crisis is by acting boldly, but do you think there's anything at all to the Republican argument that the tide has turned a little bit here and maybe we don't need such an expensive bill as the one we're about to pass and you're about to pass tomorrow?

Mr. Hoyer. Well, you know, that was their argument with the Recovery Act, a very substantially smaller piece of legislation. We passed about a billion and when it came back to the Senate it was reduced by about a quarter, and no Republican voted for it. A third of the Republicans had voted for a \$700 billion bill to respond to the Troubled Asset Relief crisis.

Now, what's my point? My point is, Republicans tend to vote for these things when there's a Republican President, and they almost universally vote against them when there's a Democratic President. It doesn't have to do with the economic argument; it has to do with the political argument. I think that's sad.

There's no doubt in my mind, if Donald Trump were the President and Donald Trump were saying -- you know, he said he wanted to send this extra 1,400 bucks to people, which we passed in the CASH Act and the Republicans didn't pass it. Of course, the President was leaving office. They didn't bring it up on -- as 44 -- but 44 Republicans did vote for it.

So, I think this is about politics, not about economics, and that's sad. But it is a consistent performance.

I use the example when Sandy relief was voted on many years ago, where there were 50-plus million people adversely affected by Superstorm Sandy, all but 44 Republicans voted against it. There's no doubt that that was a crisis.

So, I think their vote here is a political vote. Their observation as to whether it's needed is a political vote. That's why I pointed out in the beginning, we passed -- this is the sixth bill. We passed five previously.

And every one of those bills had a substantial number of Republican votes. As I pointed out, 192 on the first one; 140 in the second; passed by voice vote in the House on the third one; 177 Republicans on the fourth one; and 53 Republicans on the December 21, which was also the omnibus, so probably a lesser vote than otherwise we would have gotten, and Trump was leaving office.

So that my experience is, and my view is, it has to do with who the President of the United States is, not what the substance of the -- or status of the economy or substance of the bill.

This is a good bill that helps literally millions of people and will obviously help the economy. Economists believe that this is going to pump up the economy?

And unlike when the Republicans passed, also through reconciliation, their tax bill, which went to, you know, 85 percent of it went to the wealthiest 1 percent in America,

this bill goes to Middle America and the most vulnerable in America, and the Republicans are voting against it. Unfortunate. It's political.

Staff. Thank you.

Our next question is from Cristina Marcos from The Hill.

Cristina, your line is now unmuted, and you may ask your question.

Q Hey, Leader Hoyer. Thanks for doing this.

Mr. Hoyer. You bet.

Q So we're coming up on about a year since all the school and business closures due to the pandemic, and one of the changes the House has done to adapt to the pandemic, of course, has been proxy voting. And especially lately with more Republicans buying into this and using proxy voting, I'm wondering if even post-pandemic you'd see a, quote/unquote, new normal where there is some form -- there is a limited form of proxy voting that's allowed to continue.

For example, there are other legislatures around the world that have long allowed for members who are on parental leave or they are sick to vote remotely.

So I'm wondering if that's something you could see becoming a permanent option going forward.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, of course, it's ironic and somewhat humorous that the Republicans railed against it and filed suits against it, said it was the wrong thing to do, and now you see, as you pointed out, I don't know what the last vote last week was and how many Republicans, but I saw proxy holders lining up on the Republican side of the aisle and getting up and saying they're casting a proxy vote on behalf of X, Y, or Z.

So I think what happened was they found they had a lot of Members who also were concerned about travel and concerned about their own health or the health of some of the members of their family and decided not to come.

Now, having said that, as you know, the rule itself provides for the ability to proxy vote only during the course of the coronavirus crisis, and that's re-upped on a periodic basis, which has been done.

However, I think your question is a good question, and I think there will be discussion about that. There is really, you know, no magic in being in a particular room when you vote. We vote by electronic device in any event, so it's not like you're standing up saying aye or nay. You're sticking a card in and voting, in effect remotely, through an electronic device.

Having said that, I think there is -- and the Speaker and I both have articulated this -- great merit and virtue to being with one another in a room, in a committee, on the floor, interfacing personally, having debate personally.

But I think your question is correct in that you anticipate, I think there's going to be discussion about exactly that issue. Okay, well, if we did it because of the COVID-19, can we do it -- you mentioned parental leave or the birth of a child or illness or something. I think there will be discussion.

But I think the majority believes that being in person is a positive way of doing business with one another in the legislative process, whether it's in committee or on the floor or just on the Hill seeing one another. But I think there will be discussion about should we be able to vote remotely in other circumstances post-COVID-19.

Staff. Thank you.

This will be our last question for today's Pen & Pad.

Kimberly Leonard from Business Insider, your line is now unmuted and you may ask a question.

Q Hi. Thank you so much.

I actually have a more forward-looking question. As part of the next big

legislative package on economic recovery or infrastructure, are there any discussions about potentially using Medicare drug price negotiation as a way to pay for some of the larger projects that Democrats envision?

Thank you.

Mr. Hoyer. Well, and there's been an ongoing discussion, as you know, about that. And so I think the answer to that question is that that debate will continue.

I don't want to anticipate the result of that discussion, but I will tell you that there clearly will be discussion about that, as there has been on an ongoing basis about the VA negotiation for drug prices?

Almost every large user of pharmaceuticals negotiates prices. And Medicare is, of course, one of the largest, if not the largest purchaser of pharmaceuticals. Should we be negotiating on that? I think the answer to your question is: That will be part of the discussion.

Okay. I want to --

Staff. Oh, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Hoyer. Let me just conclude. We had a briefing yesterday by Lieutenant General Honoré and a group of security experts, intelligence experts, and police experts. It was a good briefing. It was a first cut, if you will, 6 weeks after January 6.

And we're going to have a lot of discussions about how to make sure that the Capitol is secure, that the people who are working here, Members, staff, press, others who are working here, janitorial staff, and all the staff that keeps this Capitol running, are, in fact, safe and are not vulnerable to a mob, an insurrectionist, war-thinking, w-a-r, war-thinking crowd that wanted to alter our democracy.

That's an insurrection. That, in my opinion, is essentially treason. And hopefully all of those who participated in that will be dealt with and will be dealt with

very severely, because the offense was a very, very serious offense on our democracy and on our Constitution, on our American Government.

The Honoré report dealt with all of the issues that -- you know, including intelligence, preparation, training, the physical way you secure the perimeter.

Fencing is obviously of concern to many people, me included. That does not mean I think the fencing was incorrect, but whether that ought to be a permanent -- I think most people think that ought not to be a permanent reality on the Hill.

But we need to make sure that we can, in fact, secure the seat of government of the United States of America from onslaughts, foreign or domestic. And in light of the fact that Director Wray of the Federal Bureau of Investigation says the largest threat, his perception, is from these White nationalists, White supremacists, racist, hate-speaking and -acting groups, that domestic terrorism is right now one of our largest problems, if not the largest domestic risk.

So that we're going to be pursuing this. And I would expect there to be a lot of focus not only in the Senate committees but also in the House committees, by the House leadership.

And I would expect at some point in time we'll be passing supplemental legislation to deal with making sure this Capitol is secure and that democracy is not threatened from either abroad or here at home from those who would substitute their judgment for the people's judgment.

Okay. Thank you all very, very much.

[Whereupon, at 11:32 a.m., the press conference was concluded.]