



United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph Lieberman
“Raising the Bar for Congress: Reform Proposals for the 21st Century”
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
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As Prepared for Delivery

The hearing will come to order. Good morning and thanks to everybody who's here for this hearing this morning. We're going to discuss ways to break the present gridlock in Congress and get this institution back to what it was created to do—work productively for our country.

I know that for some people, the very decision to hold this hearing was controversial. They've asked us why we would do it, and my response was a question back: Why wouldn't we want to hold this hearing? Why would anyone think that, based on its record, Congress is fulfilling its responsibilities to the American people? Why wouldn't we want to open the conversation, particularly based on the broad series of proposals made by a relatively new citizen, grassroots, good-government group called No Labels?

I know a particular legislative proposal - which is one part of the No Labels reform program and has been referred to the Committee - “No Budget No Pay” is controversial, but it also expresses and frames the public mood towards Congress today. Somebody said to me it's like a scream. It is. And it's a scream, whether you agree with it or not, that has to be heard and responded to.

The fact is that the public's estimation of Congress is at historic lows, and there's ample reason why that is so. Congress is just not fulfilling some of the basic responsibilities that the Constitution gives us, including the responsibility to propose, to debate, and to adopt in a timely manner a budget for our country.

Let me give you some examples of why we're here. It's been more than three years since Congress has passed a budget in time and more than a decade since Congress has done so in the manner prescribed by the rules, with all the appropriations bills being considered and passed.

Nominations to executive and judicial positions are often held up for months for political reasons by procedural maneuvers. Then when those nominations come to the floor, they're passed by an overwhelming majority. But in the meantime, important parts of our legislative and judicial branches of government have gone without the leadership they need to function on the people's behalf.

On Monday of this week, in the midst of what's been called a “judicial emergency” - which is to say there's been great backlogs of cases in federal courts because there aren't enough federal judges - the Majority Leader filed procedural motions on the nominations of 17 judges which have been held up even though they came out of the Judiciary Committee with bipartisan support.

And then last summer we came perilously close to defaulting on our nation's fiscal obligations as the debate over the national debt dragged on and on to a critical deadline. Default would not only have left us unable to pay our debt, it would have also forced a government shutdown. Standards & Poor's concisely summed up the situation when it announced it was dropping our nation's longtime AAA credit rating to AA+. Standard & Poor's said, “the downgrade reflects our view that the effectiveness, stability and predictability of America's policymaking and political institutions have weakened in a time of ongoing fiscal and economic challenges.”

That is classic financial community understatement, but it is surely the sad truth.

Today, we're going to consider those reforms that No Labels and others have put forward, and as we consider them, I think we also need to focus on the prevailing congressional and political mentality that considers 'compromise' a dirty word, and makes legislative gridlock practically inevitable.

Partisanship and ideology have been a part of American democracy since our beginning. But our forefathers did not let their competing partisan loyalties - and often quite strongly-held competing views - prevent them from reaching the kind of compromises that were so central to the formation of our country and the progress of our nation since then.

The House and Senate are themselves the result of the "Great Compromise," which we in Connecticut call the "Connecticut Compromise," because it was authored by two of my home state's delegates to the Constitutional Convention, Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth, as a way to balance the interests of the large population states and small population states.

Among the very first legislative issues the first Congress had to confront was how to fund the federal government and how to pay off our Revolutionary War debt. Sound familiar?

Factions quickly lined up behind two of the giants of the day - Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. But both of those men and their followers were able to work through their differences and reach a compromise agreement that put our nation on a sound financial footing that both funded the federal government and paid down the debt.

In modern times, Congress has been able to gather bipartisan majorities to pass landmark legislation and, in doing so, put aside a lot of differences. I'm thinking of programs like Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and the great Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s. In doing so, Congress overcame serious differences, took on historic challenges, and transformed our nation in ways that are everlasting.

Compromise in all of these cases meant not an abandonment of principle, but a willingness by all involved to settle for less than 100 percent of what each originally sought.

Today, while the enormous challenges our nation faces continue, the spirit of compromise is largely gone. Today, Members who honestly seek to understand and accommodate views from the other side of the aisle are not often embraced warmly by their own parties. In fact, too often, they are punished.

We have a national debt approaching \$16 trillion, and nearly 13 million of our fellow Americans remain unemployed. Our nation's computer networks - on which so much of our economic prosperity and national defense depend - are under attack from rival nations, terrorists, and organized criminal syndicates. Iran seeks a nuclear weapon, Syrian President Assad is massacring his own people, and our mission in Afghanistan is foundering.

We need a Congress that can vigorously debate these and the many other great challenges we face, find compromise, and then come together for the good of our nation. And that's why I think the proposals we will hear today really give us a chance to get America's legislative train back on track.

We're going to hear testimony not only from our colleagues Senator Heller and Representative Cooper on the No Budget No Pay proposal, but Senator Isakson is here to testify about the biennial budget proposal. On the second panel, we'll have some outside experts and independent thinkers commenting on the range of proposals before us.

I'll say, finally, that I've spent a lot of time going back to the early leaders of this country because I think we need their wisdom, and they set a model through their actions.

President George Washington in his first address to a joint session of the House and Senate closed with a prayer asking that the "benign Parent of the Human Race" bestow His blessing on the House and Senate so they might deliberate in "perfect tranquility" with "enlarged views," and "temperate consultations."

Seems like a long time ago.

History shows in the decades and centuries since then that Congress has been at its best when it realized Washington's vision. Now, more than ever, Congress needs to put the hyper-partisanship aside and put the needs of

our country first. We need to talk to each other in temperate language so that we might not only enlarge our views, but bring needed tranquility to the national dialogue, as well and results to the people of America who have been good enough to give us the privilege of serving here.

Senator Collins.