

Conservatives build for leadership role in the House

On Nov. 21, EIR interviewed Rep. Charles Stenholm of Texas, the leader of a group of 33 conservative House Democrats who are demanding a greater role in House policymaking and more important committee assignments. The Conservative Forum met with House Speaker Tip O'Neill on Nov. 19 and with Majority Leader Jim Wright on Nov. 20. The New York Times has reported that the group could bloc with the 192 Republicans in the new Congress and create a new majority on policy issues. Excerpts from the interview follow.

EIR: Representative Stenholm, what is the Conservative Forum?

Rep. Stenholm: It is an ad hoc group of conservative Democrats who began organizing a couple of months ago. We felt that the Democratic umbrella had been exclusive of conservative philosophical members for quite some time, both by intent and not so much by intent. We felt that under the rules of the political process, the only way to counteract that exclusiveness would be to organize to be able to present our story in as strong a manner as we could.

EIR: What Congressmen are involved and who shares your view?

Rep. Stenholm: Well, at this point we have not decided to release the names of our group as yet because we anticipate that our group will grow. We have thirty-three members at the present time. We anticipate that by the time of the organization of the Democratic caucus and the Ninety-Seventh Congress that our group will number around forty.

We felt that under the process under which we have organized, where we have attempted to put together the most conservative members of the House as a result of a rating system which is a combination of various rating systems of various groups . . . we have attempted to put it together as being a representative group of the most conservative Democrats in the House.

EIR: What do you mean by "conservative Democrat"?

Rep. Stenholm: Basically, you are talking in terms of, first off, those who are concerned about the defense posture of our nation, those who have, in the past, been on the losing side of votes within the Congress to cut

defense spending and increase social spending, which has been occurring at a tremendous rate since the early seventies.

You are talking about members of the House who believe it imperative that we balance the federal budget; that we cut federal expenditures, and then we begin cutting taxes. We are talking about members of the House who feel that we have imposed too much federal government on the American people; those who believe we have far too much regulation; those who have heeded the voices of the American people and sung "help us get out from under the tremendous paperwork burden that has been imposed on small business," for example. . . . and, just speaking generally, those who feel we have far too much federal intervention in the daily lives of American citizens.

EIR: Are there specific policy goals that your group will work with the Republicans in the House and Senate to accomplish?

Rep. Stenholm: Let me make one point clear. We are an organization of Democrats who are concerned about the Democratic Party, who are concerned about the direction of our party. Our Conservative Democratic Forum is going to be working within the political system, as Democrats, for the purpose of moderating our party, and making it more acceptable to the American people, and we feel that if we are unsuccessful in this endeavor, that we will be the minority party in the House also in 1982.

EIR: Do you have a view on the Emergency Executive Meeting of the Democratic National Committee coming up on December ninth, what direction it should take, and a new chairman?

Rep. Stenholm: I cannot speak officially because we have not taken a position or addressed that question. Thus far, our group has confined ourselves to discussing the issue of getting a more fair representation for conservative members of the Democratic Party within the House of Representatives.

We are very concerned about the direction of the Democratic National Committee has taken, as we are concerned at the direction which our own various state parties have taken with regard to policies, procedures and perceptions that we have given to the American people, to which the American people have said "no thank you." So, yes, we are very concerned with the direction and what occurs with the DNC, and we do intend to work closely with them as they deliberate over these issues. I would say, personally, that the new chairman should be one who has no ties to any of the so-called more prominent prospective nominees of our party in four years.

EIR: Federal Reserve policy seems to have become a major focus of debate in the incoming Reagan administration. What do you think of the ruling by the Federal Reserve's Board of Governors to institute International Bank Facilities, in other words, free banking zones?

Rep. Stenholm: I have some great concern about that . . . I have concern about any proposed national banking group or worldwide banking group or world-imposed monetary policies. I think we had better look twice at that.

EIR: Some people say that Volcker and his board are preempting congressional action on it by passing it by fiat before Congress comes back into session. Do you have a comment?

Rep. Stenholm: It is strongly suggested that that was done, and I can't underscore my own personal concern too much with the perceived direction that they moved.

EIR: Many are saying that now that farm prices are going up, this would be a good time to increase price supports and work toward parity. What do you think?

Rep. Stenholm: I certainly agree that we need to increase loan levels from where they are now, because if once again we have misleading signals coming from the marketplace, that there is an unlimited demand for food, and then once again the American farmer responds to that demand, and if we find, as we did in the not too distant past, that we have overproduced, the financial disasters to American farmers would be tremendous.

I certainly think that we need to increase the levels of the loans, not to 100 percent of parity, but to increase them to such a level that working in conjunction with the farmer-held reserve system that we would be able to maintain farm income at a more acceptable level than where it is today.

We still have not sold one bushel of wheat in 1980 above the average cost of production in the United States to anybody. So the concern that many are expressing that food has moved too high, in fact, is unfounded—it has not yet reached cost of production levels on the average in the United States.

EIR: How do you feel about Senator Boren's [an Oklahoma Democrat] comments about "consensus" and working out policies to enact together with the congressional Republicans?

Rep. Stenholm: I certainly think that the mandate of the American people on November fourth is one that anyone who intends to have a political future must listen to. We think that the problems of our country are serious enough that it is time for us to begin trying to work out solutions. Arriving at a consensus in the majority of the House is certainly one of our goals.

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