Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Specter bills would support dairy farmers

On April 17, Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) introduced legislation to require the Department of Agriculture to take certain actions to maintain reasonable prices paid to dairy farmers for their milk production. Referring to the steep decline in milk prices that began in November 1996, Specter said, "I am of the firm opinion that something needs to be done to help the milk farmers."

The first of two bills that Specter introduced, which is co-sponsored by Sens. Russ Feingold (D-Wisc.) and Herb Kohl (D-Wisc.), would require the USDA to "collect and disseminate statistically reliable information from milk manufacturing plants on prices received for bulk cheese," and would give the department the authority to require the reporting of such price information by manufacturing plants on prices received for cheese. This would replace the benchmark now provided by the National Cheese Exchange in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The Exchange, an entity controlled by the commodity cartels, has come under sharp criticism for possibly manipulating prices paid to farmers.

Specter's second bill would require that the prices paid by farmers for feed grains and other inputs required to produce milk be factored in when establishing the benchmark price for milk. "The government," Specter said, "should use what it costs for producers to establish the price of milk, so that if the farmers are caught with rising prices of feed and other rising costs of production, they can have those rising costs reflected in the cost of milk."

Feingold criticized the National Cheese Exchange for having such "tremendous influence" over national cheese prices despite the minuscule amount of cheese that is actually traded on the exchange. He said, "It is essential that dairy farmers have some assurances that cheese prices, which have such a dramatic impact on the price of milk, are reflective of market conditions and are not vulnerable to manipulation."

Alexis Herman taken hostage in Senate

On April 15, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) indicated that the nomination of Alexis Herman to be secretary of labor, which has been cleared by the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, might be held up over Republican objections to an Executive Order proposed by President Clinton that would require the consideration of project agreements, which set union wage scales and work rules on Federal construction projects. Lott warned that if Clinton goes ahead with the proposed Executive Order, it might have consequences for the Labor Department budget, and other Labor Department nominees.

Democrats reacted angrily to Lott's threats, which have nothing to do with Herman. John Kerry (D-Mass.) said, at a conference of the Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO, that what is behind the holding up of Herman's nomination is "deep-rooted ideology, a notion that workers don't have rights," and that "all the things that the labor movement has struggled for all these years and more somehow can be trampled on by one or two senators who want to deny the Constitutional rights of the Senate itself."

Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) added his voice the following day, against a bill introduced by Tim Hutchinson (R-Ark.) which would prohibit project labor agreements on Federal construction projects. Kennedy said that historically, such agreements have been very successful and beneficial, and have actually reduced costs by reducing work time lost due to strikes and accidents. "At the very least," he said, "the Federal government should not be denied the opportunity to gain the substantial benefits and savings that such agreements can supply."

Budget deadline passes without resolution

The April 15 statutory deadline mandating passage of a budget resolution in both House and Senate, went by without any sign that such a resolution was soon forthcoming. Instead, Republicans brought to the House floor a proposed constitutional amendment to require a two-thirds vote to pass a tax increase, a measure which fell 67 votes short of the two-thirds vote required for passage.

In the Senate on the same day, Republicans offered what Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) described as a resolution "condemning taxes." He accused them of "throwing red meat to a rabid right wing because they have nothing else to give."

Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) said that Congress spent the first month and a half talking about the Balanced Budget Amendment, because "that's what the majority party wanted to talk about," but, "when it comes time to do the actual work to put together the plan to require a balanced bduget, they're nowhere in sight."

Republicans have said repeatedly that they need agreement from President Clinton to proceed with the budget process, but Democrats reject that argument. Instead, they suggest that Republicans are caught between their promise to balance the budget, and their promise to their biggest contributors to cut taxes.

Gingrich leans on Dole to pay ethics penalty

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), in a speech on the House floor on April 17, announced that he would be paying his $300,000 ethics penalty with a personal loan from former senator and Presidential candidate Bob Dole.

In his remarks, Gingrich reduced the whole scandal around him to two letters to the ethics committee prepared by his former attorneys, which contained innaccurate information about his "Renewing American Civilization" course. He placed the blame for the inaccurate information entirely on the lawyers who prepared the letters, but said, "I bear full responsibility for them and I accept that responsibility." He suggested that he may sue his former attorneys, but "that option could take years in court," which was why he ruled this option out as a method of paying the penalty.

Gingrich's announcement was accompanied by fireworks from Democrats, who objected to the praise being showered on Gingrich by his Republican colleagues. Lloyd Doggett (D-Tex.) said that "pollution is what has occurred here, lies and deception that threaten the very fabric of our democracy." He added, "There is nothing noble about the payment of the fine. There is something very ignoble about the conduct that produced it."

John Lewis (D-Ga.) said, "I'm surprised to see my Republican colleagues on the floor today congratulating Speaker Gingrich for doing something he should have done months ago, paying $300,000 for lying to Congress." Lewis's words were ruled out of order and stricken from the record, and then he was prevented from continuing with his remarks, both times on party line roll call votes.

Mobutu, not British, attacked in House vote

The House on April 17 passed by voice vote a resolution calling on Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko to resign and leave the country. The basic presumption of the resolution is that the crisis in Zaire is solely Mobutu's fault. No mention is made of the role of British-allied forces from Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda in invading Zaire.

Ed Royce (R-Calif.), one of the resolution's sponsors, said the immediate task in Zaire "is to stop the fighting, develop a transitional government, and start on the path toward democracy. Mr. Mobutu has no role to play in this process. He should immediately resign . . . leave Zaire and withdraw from all political activity."

While the denunciation of Mobutu was unanimous, those who spoke were cautious in their references to mercenary Laurent Kabila, the leader of the so-called "rebels" in eastern Zaire. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) said that Kabila "has ushered in" a new era in Zaire, but "we have to be cautious not to anoint him or anyone else for that fact, before they have proven their commitment to democracy, a free market economy, a commitment to holding elections in a reasonable time frame."

Don Payne (D-N.J.), a staunch supporter of British genocidal policies in Africa, said, "I am not pro-Kabila or anti-Kabila, but I think the time is right, that we should see new leadership in that country."

Trade sanctions hurt U.S., businesses say

On April 16, USA-Engage, a coalition of business associations led by the National Foreign Trade Council and the National Farm Bureau Federation, began a drive to "encourage government to seek alternatives to unilateral sanctions policies," which hurt U.S. economic interests. The drive is backed by a number of members of Congress.

The consensus of USA-Engage is that sanctions policies have little effect in changing the behavior of the targetted countries, and cost the U.S. export economy $15-19 billion per year.

The leaders of USA-Engage were joined by Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) and Reps. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.), and Don Manzullo (R-Ill.). Lugar said that unilateral sanctions give a competitive edge to foreign companies, but are attractive to many in the U.S. Congress, because "they create the illusion of action, allowing us to defer more decisive steps that might be justified by the nature of the security threat." He added that sanctions make diplomatic engagement and trade liberalization both more difficult. Though no countries against which the United States has applied sanctions in the last few years were singled out as nations which should get better treatment, Manzullo specifically complained that the environmental restrictions placed on U.S. Export-Import Bank assistance prevent U.S. companies from participating in China's Three Gorges Dam Project.