

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Moseley-Braun breezes through Senate hearing

On Nov. 8, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted 17-1 in favor of former Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun's (D-Ill.) nomination as U.S. Ambassador to New Zealand, the one vote against her being cast by committee chairman Jesse Helms (R-N.C.). The vote followed a confirmation hearing on Nov. 5 that was notable for the absence of Helms, Moseley-Braun's chief antagonist, who turned the gavel over to Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee Chairman Craig Thomas (R-Wyo.). Thomas would not explain to reporters before the hearing, why Helms chose not to appear, but he adamantly denied that the GOP is insensitive and racist. Thomas expressed confidence that Moseley-Braun would be confirmed by the full Senate, before it adjourns for the year.

Helms had recently sparked a storm of criticism, after telling the Capitol Hill newspaper *Roll Call*, that he was still angry at Moseley-Braun for blocking, in 1993, Senate renewal of a patent for the United Daughters of the Confederacy, that included the Confederate flag. Helms's opposition to Moseley-Braun's nomination had particularly raised the ire of the Congressional Black Caucus, several members of which, including Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), appeared at the Senate hearing to show their support for Moseley-Braun. Two days before the hearing, the Caucus staged a sit-in at Helms's office when he refused to meet with them to discuss the nomination.

The hearing itself was a light-hearted affair, with only Paul Coverdell (R-Ga.) asking any serious questions. Other senators repeatedly yielded him their time so that he could ask Moseley-Braun about her 1996 trip to Nigeria, and about allegations of misuse of

campaign funds in her successful 1992 election campaign, all of which she answered easily, apparently to Coverdell's satisfaction.

While Moseley-Braun's confirmation may turn out to be easier than expected, one that was expected to be easy, the nomination of Adm. Joseph Prueher to be U.S. Ambassador to China, was suddenly blocked by Robert C. Smith (R-N.H.). Smith complained that Prueher is "too pro-Beijing." However, both have been confirmed by the full Senate.

Africa trade bill approved by Senate

The African Growth and Opportunity Act breezed to passage in the Senate on Nov. 3, by a vote of 76-19. The Senate turned aside a number of amendments sponsored by Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.) and his allies, intended to ameliorate the effects of free trade on manufacturing industries. Included were provisions that would have required the negotiation of side agreements on labor and environmental conditions, reciprocal agreements to lower tariffs on imports of U.S. goods, and on transshipments.

Hollings continued his staunch defense of heavy industry and manufacturing. He cited *Wall Street Journal* reports that AFL-CIO President John Sweeney's decision to support the Clinton administration's agenda for the World Trade Organization summit in Seattle "rankled the more militant unions," especially the Teamsters and the United Steelworkers of America. "Those are the manufacturing jobs," he said. "Just as the fabric boys [the textile unions] divorced themselves from apparel and now toot for this kind of [free trade] legislation, the head of the service economy, John Sweeney, has forgotten about manufacturing

jobs, and he is going along." Hollings added that that is the reason for the bipartisan support for the bill.

On the House side, a number of Democrats offered privileged resolutions calling on President Clinton to refrain from negotiating any international agreements on anti-dumping and countervailing measures. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) argued that, under the Constitution, only the House has the authority to alter existing revenue provisions. By allowing the White House to negotiate these issues, he said, "we are essentially allowing the administration to act on authority it does not have." However, Republicans were not interested in discussing the issue, and all the resolutions were tabled without debate on Nov. 4, on near party-line votes.

Bankruptcy bill debate under way in Senate

The Senate began debate on the bankruptcy reform bill on Nov. 4, after weeks of wrangling on separate issues, most notably, Democratic attempts to raise the minimum wage (see separate item). The debate took on many of the same characteristics that were in evidence during a similar debate in the House last May.

Charles Grassley (R-Iowa), the chief Senate sponsor of bankruptcy reform, claimed that abuse of the bankruptcy system puts upward pressure on interest rates, because increasing rates is the only way creditors can recover their losses when debtors file for bankruptcy. The bill, he said, "will discourage bankruptcies and therefore lessen upward pressure on interest rates and higher prices by making it harder for people who can repay their debts to wipe them away." The bill accomplishes this by use of a means test, to

force some of those who file into Chapter 13, which requires payment of at least some of a filer's debts.

The most crucial issue finally began to seep into the debate. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) told the Senate that recent research shows that the primary reasons for the skyrocketing increase in bankruptcy filings, to 1.4 million in 1998, are "stagnant wages and consumer credit card debt." He identified the fact that the bankruptcy system serves as a safety net for the most vulnerable of the middle class, such as older people who have lost their jobs or are unable to pay medical bills, and individuals struggling to recover from unemployment.

However, aside from increasing the minimum wage, the only measure that opponents of the bill have offered is greater accountability by credit card issuers. "The billions of credit card solicitations that are sent to Americans every year," Leahy said, "have contributed to an era of lax credit practices. That, in turn, contributes to the steep rise in personal bankruptcy filings."

GOP minimum wage plan gets Senate okay

A duel between competing minimum wage plans ended in a narrow GOP victory in the Senate on Nov. 9. The GOP plan, attached to the bankruptcy reform bill, would increase the minimum wage by \$1 per hour over three years, and provide \$18.4 billion in tax cuts to businesses over five years. The Democrats' plan, sponsored by Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), would have phased in the minimum wage increase over two years, and included a tax cut of about \$9.5 billion. It was tabled by a vote of 50-48.

The Senate vote doesn't settle the

matter, however. The GOP plan is unacceptable to Senate Democrats and the White House. President Clinton has threatened to veto the bill if it reaches his desk with the GOP plan in it, and Democrats, encouraged by the close vote on tabling Kennedy's amendment, have vowed to continue the fight.

A similar battle has been shaping up in the House. Rick Lazio (R-N.Y.) and Gary Condit (D-Calif.) introduced a bill on Nov. 2 that would increase the minimum wage by \$1 over three years, and provide about \$30 billion in tax breaks. However, they have been hampered by the House GOP leadership. Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.) and Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) are opposed to increasing the minimum wage, and have told Lazio that his bill won't come to the floor unless it has enough Democratic votes to pass.

Democrats, on the other hand, are being pressured by Minority Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.) to support his bill, which increases the minimum wage over two years, and provides a tax cut of about \$8 billion. Many GOPers have accepted, however, that the minimum wage will be increased, and are therefore searching for a way to avoid handing Bonior a victory.

Wye funding put in Foreign Ops bill

On Nov. 5, the House approved a compromise with President Clinton on the Foreign Operations appropriations bill by a vote of 316-100. The bill includes \$799 million in foreign aid and \$1.8 billion to support the Wye River Middle East peace agreement not in the bill Clinton vetoed in October. Overall, the bill comes to \$15.2 billion, but outlays will be close to \$12.7 billion be-

cause of offsets and changes in the way funds will be distributed, such as delaying some military aid to Israel until later in the year than is customary.

The bill includes \$35 million for heavy fuel oil deliveries to North Korea, but it conditions release of the funds on administration certification that North Korea is complying with the provisions of the agreed framework for ending its nuclear weapons program. Earlier versions of the bill zeroed out the program completely.

Meanwhile, GOP leaders, and White House Office of Management and Budget Director Jack Lew, narrowed some differences over remaining appropriations bills during meetings on Nov. 8 and 9, but so far, no major breakthroughs have been achieved. One indication that serious difficulties remain, was the House passage of yet another continuing resolution, this one good until Nov. 17 (a clear sign that the GOP leadership had abandoned efforts to adjourn for the year on Nov. 10).

The most visible disagreement remains over Clinton's plan to hire 100,000 new teachers. Republicans say that they have provided even more money for education than the President has requested, but rather than earmarking the funds for more teachers, they insist on block grants. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) said that the big issue is who controls the money. "We believe that we can reach agreement on that," he said, "but we don't think that we should just dictate that it must be one certain way from Washington, D.C."

Republicans have agreed to add another \$625 million to the Commerce, Justice, State and the Judiciary bill, but it remains stalled by GOP demands to link U.S. payments to the UN to restrictions on funding for abortion programs.