

Congressional Calendar

Senate debates health care

Sen. Edward Kennedy's much publicized national health care package awaits formal submission to the Senate, which most likely will occur by mid-April. It is now in the final drafting stages.

Meanwhile, a flood of major health care bills have already been submitted and are awaiting action in the Senate Finance and Human Resources Committees. Some, like the Carter Administration's own hospital cost containment bill, are designed as "first installments" on the service-cutting zero-technological-growth package pushed by Kennedy. Others, like the catastrophic illness bills submitted by Sen. Russell Long (D-La), head of the Finance Committee, and Sen. Robert Dole (R-Kansas) appear designed to extend health care benefits to Americans without fully imposing the Kennedy cost-cutting strait jacket, but make significant concessions to the "fiscal austerity" mentality nonetheless.

S. 570, the Administration's hospital cost containment bill, is a mechanism under which all hospitals that did not hold costs below a 9.7 percent rate of annual growth by Jan. 1, 1980 would be penalized by federal refusal to pay medicare and medicaid costs, by a 150 percent penalty payment on "overcharges," etc. (The annual inflation rate for the whole economy during the first quarter of 1979

was over 12 percent.) Hospitals in states where mandatory cost containment at similar levels is already in effect would be exempt.

S. 570 is scheduled for final markup in the Finance Committee April 10-11. Committee sources refused to predict it would emerge in its original form; Senator Talmadge, head of its health subcommittee, and the powerful Senator Long oppose it.

S. 505, a revision of Medicare-Medicaid law sponsored by Talmadge, is a grab bag, which, among other things, attempts to head off the political momentum of the Kennedy caravan through such "cost-containment" devices as a pilot program providing payments to nonprofit hospitals to cover "increased operating costs" associated with "the closing down or conversion of underutilized bed capacity." The bill estimates the figures at 10 percent of total available beds nationally.

S. 350-351, introduced by Long, would set up a federal insurance program under Social Security to insure medical expenses of more than \$2000 and hospital costs beyond 60 days. Employers would be subject to a 1 percent payroll tax to finance the program, or would purchase comparable private insurance, with the premiums subject to 50 percent tax credit.

A third bill offered by Long, S.

760, takes a slightly different approach by mandating all employers to provide catastrophic coverage, omitting the payroll tax, and providing tax credits to small employers and to other persons wishing to purchase such health coverage. The bill would also establish a federal medical assistance plan for low income people. Sen. Dole's bill, S. 748, is similar and would operate wholly through private insurance carriers, providing assistance to low-income families not covered by medicaid and expanding medicare and medicaid benefits.

Long and Dole have both made their desire obvious to strike a bipartisan deal around some version of these bills—taking the steam out of Ted Kennedy's prime issue by passing a major health insurance bill this year.

Hart calls for crisis control 'after Harrisburg'

Senator Gary Hart (D-Col) began surprise hearings April 10 in the nuclear regulatory subcommittee of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee on the cause of the Three Mile Island incident. His hearings also covered what should be done with similar crises in the future. In a statement capturing the Senator's opposition to economic or technological growth, Hart declared that "This investigation will ask whether man can control his destiny in such times ... whether man can control high technology or whether high technology will control him. The question is, does the system work ... is federal regulation and control sufficient to warrant the further use of nuclear power?"

Hart is using his hearings to provide the impetus toward establishing a crisis management capability to deal with such crises in the future, a proposal that will allow complete coordination of energy programs, and be an important interface to the entire plan for militarized control over the U.S. economy. Hart, who explicitly called for such a capability at his hearings, is working closely with Senator Ted Kennedy, who last week demanded an independent agency to oversee the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's ability to control the nuclear industry. Hart held his hearings after pressuring more reluctant committee members that if the Environment Committee did not handle the issue, Senator Kennedy would.

Javits pushes decriminalization of marijuana

On March 15, Senator Javits introduced his yearly proposal to decriminalize marijuana, titled the Marijuana Control Act of 1979. The bill, which has been introduced into every session since the 92nd Congress, would remove all criminal prosecution for private use of one ounce or less of marijuana. Javits is finding out that there is little support for legalizing drugs and has gone through great pains to get the five co-sponsors for the bill. His office hopes that hearings on the bill, which is in Kennedy's Judiciary Committee, will be held this year and see that as an achievement.

However, according to one of his aides, Javits is using his bill to "provide the impetus to get something such as Kennedy's bill passed." Ted Kennedy intends to push for a version of decriminalization of marijuana use to be incorporated, as it was last year, into his revised criminal code legislation, and Javits's bill therefore is being used to persuade the Senate to support the "less drastic" proposals of Kennedy.

Effort to abolish Electoral College

Senator Birch Bayh (D-Ind) thought he had a deal with the Senate to have it move immediately on his proposal for a constitutional amendment to abolish the Electoral College without first holding hearings in Committee. Ted Kennedy's Senate Judiciary Committee had debated the issue last year and approved the measure. But Senate opposition to the bill has forced Bayh to hold hearings on it this week, and floor action on the measure has been delayed for at least three months. Timing of floor action is important to its opponents, who filibustered a similar proposal to death in 1970, and will do the same this session if it is raised at a time when that is possible.

—Donald Baier and
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