The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. STEVENS). Will the Senator withhold that request?

Mr. NICKLES. I withhold it.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alaska.

Mr. MURKOWSKI. I thank the Chair. Mr. President, I would like to follow on the comments made by my good friend, the senior Senator from Oklahoma, relative to the bill before this body.

I come to this Chamber as a Senator that represents a State that does not have a single HMO. As a consequence, with our small population, spread over a large land mass, I do not expect to see many HMOs moving into Alaska anytime soon. But I think this fact has led me to perhaps have an objective view, to look at this legislation with more awareness that the system will still receive some modest level of care through expensive emergency room visits or hospitalizations. If they are unable to pay, however, this bad debt will be passed on to those among us, and, as a consequence, the Federal Government will also pick up a significant share. We will all pay more when and more and more care is delivered to uninsured individuals.

I have talked to some of my constituents in Alaska. One thing is perfectly clear. They want quality health care for their families, not a prime slot on the local court's docket.

Let's not be coy about who is really pushing this legislation. It is the trial lawyers, and the trial lawyers smell blood in the water.

I applaud Senator FRIST and Senator BREAUX, and others, for putting forward a more well-thought-out Patients' Bill of Rights. They have this right: Americans want to see their doctor and their specialist in a timely and appropriate manner; they do not want to see their employer, who has gone the extra mile to offer health care benefits, dragged into court.

Under the McCain-Kennedy bill, an employer could be subjected to unlimited economic damages, unlimited noneconomic damages, and up to $5 million in punitive damages.

I have served in this body for a little over 20 years. During that time, I have worked to strengthen and support America's small businesses. I firmly believe that small businesses are the backbone of our economy and represent the ideals that form this country. These are the folks who take the risks.

I am grateful that we are debating this bill. I am also grateful that this bill will be subjected to an amendment process. We have a lot of work to do. The first thing we should do is to make sure that employers are not subject to liability simply because they want to care for their employees. Together we can make this a true Patients' Bill of Rights bill. I am committed to having a solid piece of legislation sent to our President for his signature.

NOMINATION OF J. STEVEN GRILES

Mr. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I am very concerned. The Energy and Natural Resources Committee has oversight of the Department of the Interior. As a consequence, we have had the responsibility of holding hearings on the nomination of various individuals for the Department of the Interior.

It is rather ironic that the only individual at the Department of the Interior who has been cleared by the Senate in its entirety is Secretary Gale Norton. We have had a situation with regard to the Deputy Secretary, Mr. Steven Griles, that deserves some examination by this body.

Mr. Griles was nominated on March 9 by our President. Hearings were held on May 16, as I chaired the Energy and Natural Resources Committee. He was reported favorably out of the committee by a vote of 18-4 on May 23 of this year. All this was prior to the switch by Senator Jeffords who made his announcement on May 24. At that time, we immediately began to try to move the nomination. The minority also tried to get a time agreement.

According to the information we have from the floor staff, Griles was encased as it is currently drafted, those individuals would have to take on even more financial burdens. Newly uninsured individuals will still receive some modest level of care through increased emergency room visits or hospitalizations. If they are unable to pay, however, this bad debt will be passed on to those among us, and, as a consequence, the Federal Government will also pick up a significant share. We will all pay more when more and more care is delivered to uninsured individuals.

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cleared on the Republican side on May 23. In an executive session on May 23, we did move one nomination. On May 24, we moved 19 nominations. On May 25, we moved 33 nominations. On May 26, we moved 8 nominations. In each case, Griles was cleared by the Republican side but objected to by the Democratic side. I wonder why.

During this period of time, we had 38 nominations on the table. I can only assume that one of the purposes of these delays was to keep energy nominations off the schedule. This would be consistent with the philosophy that says that energy is not a matter of concern to the American people. That is the issue of energy.

Close to the interests and heart of the American people is the energy crisis. It starts with our increased dependence on foreign oil, as was evidenced by the actions of the Democratic leadership in the Senate. It starts with our increased dependence on foreign oil. We are importing 56 percent of the total oil we consume in this country. In 1975, when we had gasoline in abundance, when we had gasoline lines around the block, when we had the Arab oil embargo, as a consequence of that, we were 37-percent dependent. We created a Strategic Petroleum Reserve. We felt that we never wanted to exceed 50 percent in imports because it would affect national security. Now we are 56-percent dependent and the Department of Energy says that it will be 66 percent by 2010.

Secondly, natural gas—which we have plenty of here in America—by the end of the year is expected to quadruple. We are looking for electric energy from the resources of gas. So that has changed.

Third, the nuclear industry—not that we have built a new nuclear plant in more than 10 years—nearly 20 years. I am concerned about air quality and emissions, and we are concerned about Kyoto, global warming, climate change. What particular source of energy contributes more relief and does not emit any emissions of any consequence? Nuclear energy. The nuclear industry contributes 22 percent of the power generated in this country. We haven’t done a thing in that area.

When we talk about gasoline prices, why are they so high? Obviously, it is the law of supply and demand. Even without changes in the oil market, we haven’t built a new refinery in 25 years. The last new one was built in my State of Alaska. The demand is up and we have more people driving.

An interesting thing to notice, while we have other sources of energy for power generation, is that America moves on oil. I wish we had another alternative, but we don’t. Our ships, our trains, trucks, cars, airplanes—we don’t fly in and out of Washington, DC, on hot air. Somebody has to drill the oil and refine it and transport it and put it in the airplanes, and so forth.

My point is clear. We don’t have any other alternative for energy to move America, other than oil at this time. The technology simply doesn’t exist.

We haven’t built a new coal-fired plant in this country since 1995. Suddenly, we find that our electric transmission lines haven’t been expanded, our natural gas transmission lines are full. What is that? What is that? That is why we have an energy crisis. That is why it is different than ever before. It has all kind of come together like the “perfect storm.” Everything has come together

ENERGY

Mr. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I rise to discuss a matter I know is very close to the interests and the heart of my colleague who occupies the chair. That is the need to cure energy.

As we look at energy in view of the calendar, it is quite obvious that while energy appears to be the No. 1 issue in the minds of most Americans today, it certainly is not on the minds of the leadership in the Senate body. Energy is not even on the calendar, which is a big problem.

It is my understanding, after the Patient’s Bill of Rights, we will probably go to a supplemental. We may have the minimum wage, any number of things. Energy is not on the list.

I can only assume that one of the purposes of these delays was to keep energy nominations off the schedule. This would be consistent with the philosophy that says that energy is not a matter of concern to the American people. That is the issue of energy.

When you think about it, you might say the Democrats are waging a war against the prosperity and freedoms associated with the character of this country. The character of this country, to a large degree, is directly associated with a standard of living. That standard of living is based on affordable energy and a plentiful supply. Energy really powers our Nation’s freedom, our national security. It gives us the flexibility to live our lives as we choose, to pursue our hopes and our goals. Energy powers the workplace, moves the economy, moving it forward and bringing all of us along with it.

As we know, as evidenced by the polls, the energy supply and price of energy are all part of the energy crisis in this country. Supplies are threatened, costs are rising, and the resulting crisis is undermining our economy.

When an issue of this magnitude touches so many families in so many ways, Congress simply must act. We must do what we can to help provide solutions to the crisis. And now with the threat of change in the Senate leadership, it seems to me that the Senate will have on the other side is a lack of interest in even including energy on the agenda. We have asked the Democratic leadership time and time again to schedule on the calendar time so we can debate the comprehensive energy bills that have been introduced. These bills are pending in the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, where I am now the ranking member. But the reality is we can’t seem to move or get any time agreement or any priority in this body.

It is amazing that the emphasis seems to be blaming our President—a President who has proposed a methodology for fixing energy from his energy task force report specific recommendations. One of the more interesting things is the manner in which some in the media are coming to the general assumption that there really isn’t a shortage at all, and that this is something that has been trumped up by the oil industry, big oil, with the knowledge and support of the President.

How ridiculous, Mr. President. I have a chart here that shows why things are different, why this crisis exists. Anybody who suggest there is no crisis is not being realistic.

This is America’s energy crisis today. It starts with our increased dependence on foreign oil. We are importing 56 percent of the total oil we consume in this country. In 1975, when we had gasoline in abundance, when we had gasoline lines around the block, when we had the Arab oil embargo, as a consequence of that, we were 37-percent dependent. We created a Strategic Petroleum Reserve. We felt that we never wanted to exceed 50 percent in imports because it would affect national security. Now we are 56-percent dependent and the Department of Energy says that it will be 66 percent by 2010.

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