

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. AL-LARD). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak for up to 15 minutes on the time the Democrats have with respect to the Estrada nomination.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WYDEN. Thank you very much, Mr. President, for your courtesy earlier in the morning.

THE HEALTH CARE THAT WORKS FOR ALL AMERICANS ACT

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, right now the eyes of the Nation are focused on international crises. The threat of war with Iraq, the conflict at the United Nations, and a diplomatic standoff with North Korea are all critical issues about which this country is concerned.

But here at home there is a domestic crisis of massive proportions that affects the lives of millions of Americans each day; that is, the failure of our health care system to work for all Americans.

I will take just a few minutes to discuss this because next week I anticipate that thousands of Americans will get together in communities across the Nation as part of the special effort to highlight the concerns of the uninsured. This is under the auspices of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, an organization that works in a non-partisan fashion.

I expect to see thousands of Americans in their communities—businesspeople, senior citizens, labor organizations, those from charitable groups—so many who are falling between the cracks in our health care system speaking out and calling for congressional action. I think it is very timely because Congress must get at this critical issue.

Very shortly, the senior Senator from Utah, Mr. HATCH, and I will again go forward with our bipartisan proposal, the Health Care That Works For All Americans Act. Our legislation has been endorsed by the Chamber of Commerce, the AFL-CIO, and the American Association of Retired Persons—three groups that do not normally flock together—because I think there is a feeling that what has been tried for the last 57 years, in the effort to create a health care system that works for all, simply has not worked.

For 57 years, there has been an effort to write health care legislation in Washington, DC. The American people find these bills illegible, the special interest groups attack, and invariably nothing happens.

So what Senator HATCH and I will shortly propose is something fundamentally different, an effort to look outside the beltway here in Washington, DC, to the American people, an effort that will begin with the central questions, and coming up with a system that works for all Americans.

Those questions are, first and foremost, what are the essential services Americans want in a comprehensive health reform bill? Second, what will those services cost? And, third, who is going to pay for them?

I am of the view that getting the American people involved in those kinds of issues—issues that are central to creating a system that works for all—is the only way Congress is going to break the gridlock on this question.

Right now, we are seeing our small businesses getting annual premiums rising more than 20 percent a year. Many health care providers, particularly physicians in rural and urban areas, are leaving the Government programs because of inadequate reimbursement rates. Certainly we have heard from many health care providers about rising insurance costs. And then, of course, for seniors, their prescription drug bills are hitting them just like a wrecking ball.

All of this, of course, is happening before the demographic tsunami of millions of baby boomer retirees, as 2010 and 2011 approaches. In those years we are going to start seeing a bow wave of baby boomer retirees that is going to continue for 15 to 20 years, after it begins in 2010 and 2011, and clearly our health care system is not prepared for it.

So the question then becomes, what is going to be done to break the gridlock on this issue? You have very powerful interests. And certainly, partisan feelings on these issues run very strongly. If you go to a lot of Republican meetings and talk about the health care cost crisis, they say: Of course it is a problem. We have to act on this. It is just the trial lawyers' fault. Let's go and take them on, and things will get better.

Then if you go to a lot of Democratic meetings and talk about health care costs and the health care crisis, they will say: You bet it is the insurance companies. If you take them on, everything is going to get better.

What Senator HATCH and I have said, in this essentially unprecedented, bipartisan effort, that really would involve the American people in creating a new health care system, is that we realize so many of these powerful organizations are going to have to look at changes that have been resisted in the past. My sense is it is time for the Congress to act, and to begin by ensuring there will be congressional action on these issues.

If you look, for example, at the last time the Congress debated significant health reform, back in 1993 and 1994, there were not even any votes on this issue. After all of the debate and all of

the controversy surrounding those proposals in 1993 and 1994, there were not even votes in the Congress on fundamental reforms.

So what Senator HATCH and I have done is ensure that after the public is given an opportunity to weigh in—in community meetings, on line, and across the country—on the kind of health care system that would work for all Americans, we guarantee a vote on the floor of the Senate and a vote in the House of Representatives on this issue.

I think by involving the public, and then following up promptly with an assurance there will actually be votes in the Congress on these issues, we have a chance to move this debate forward in a fashion we have not seen in the past.

What seems unfortunate is there are lots of ideas with respect to how to move forward on comprehensive health reform but no vehicle for bringing together the American people and a way for Congress to follow up on those initiatives. That is why I have believed, with Senator HATCH, we can take a fresh approach that could really break with the past.

I was struck, in preparing this legislation, how similar the efforts were over the last 58 years. If you look at what Harry Truman proposed in 1945, in the 81st Congress, it was remarkably similar, in terms of how the debate unfolded, to what President Clinton proposed in 1993 and 1994. In both cases, you began with bills written in Washington, DC. The American people found the proposals incomprehensible. They were attacked by interest groups. And the legislation died at that point.

I see the distinguished chairman of the Judiciary Committee in the Chamber. I know he is going to begin discussion on the Estrada nomination very shortly.

Since he is in the Chamber, I express my thanks to the distinguished chairman of the Judiciary Committee. He has been working with me for a substantial amount of time on our bipartisan health reform proposal. Because next week will involve thousands of Americans at the grassroots level talking about these issues, I thought it was important to come to the floor today and say that the Senate is now listening because the chairman of the Judiciary Committee has been willing to work with me on these issues, because he shares my view that it is critically important that we break the gridlock on the health care issue.

I announce to the Senate that very shortly Senator HATCH and I will be going forward with our proposal, the Health Care that Works for All Americans Act. We have gotten a formal endorsement from the Chamber of Commerce, the AFL-CIO, and the AARP—three groups that do not exactly flock together on a regular basis. To a great extent, those organizations have been involved because of the prestige and stature of the senior Senator from Utah. He is, of course, the author of the

CHIP legislation, which was a tremendous breakthrough in terms of health care coverage for young people. He has worked with me extensively on community health center legislation.

At a time when the eyes of our Nation are focused on international crises, I want to draw some attention to the incredible crisis at home with respect to health care. We have millions of citizens who are not old enough for Medicare. They are not poor enough for Medicaid. Small businesses are being crushed by annual premiums. Physicians are leaving the system. Older people are not able to afford their medicine. This Congress, with the ingenuity and the talent in this Chamber, can come up with a health care system that works for all Americans.

Toward that end, I have been very gratified that the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, the senior Senator from Utah, has joined me for a substantial time. We are going to stay at it until we get our proposal on the floor and the Congress breaks with this 57-year gridlock on the health care issue, gridlock that dates back to the days of Harry Truman. We can do it with some bipartisanship, which is what the Senator from Utah and I have tried to offer.

I will talk more about this next week when Coverage for the Uninsured Week begins across the country.

I thank again the Senator from Utah and yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. GRAHAM of South Carolina). The Senator from Utah.

Mr. HATCH. I thank my dear colleague from Oregon for his leadership in this area. When he was in the House, he was one of the great leaders on health care issues. He is repeating that leadership in the Senate. It is a privilege to work with him because you can rely on him. When he says he will do something, he does it. He is very intelligent in health care matters. I have a lot of respect for him, and it is a privilege to work with him. I hope people will listen to the bill that we will present because it is the way to at least move us off the dime and get us to do what we should be doing on health care. I thank him and pay tribute to him this morning.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I appreciate the courtesy of the Senator from Utah. We are going to move to the Estrada nomination in executive session. However, prior to doing that, Senator ROBERTS and I are here. We have long served on the Ethics Committee, and we have a statement we wish to give. Senator HATCH has agreed that we can do so prior to going to executive session.

I ask unanimous consent that Senator ROBERTS and I be allowed to speak. As far as the time after that is concerned, we do not believe it needs to be equally divided. If Senator HATCH wants to take all the time, he can do that. I don't think we have anybody who wishes to speak.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

TRIBUTE TO VICTOR BAIRD

Mr. REID. Mr. President, when I was first elected to the Senate, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out the committee structure. It is different than it is in the House. But I learned quickly that here, as in the House, the work gets done in committees.

I was fortunate early to be asked to serve on the Appropriations Committee and the Public Works Committee. I have served on these committees since I have been in the Senate. In these committees, I saw that the two ingredients necessary for successful operation of a committee were to make sure that there was not extreme partisanship and that we and a good, competent staff.

I have served in the majority and the minority while a Member of the Senate. I have been ranking member of a subcommittee, a chairman of a subcommittee. I have been chairman of a full committee on two separate occasions.

But regardless of which capacity I have served in, these ingredients remain constant.

Though I enjoyed the benefits of both good staff and bipartisanship during my years on these excellent committees, I was uncertain what to expect when I was asked to serve on the Committee on Ethics. I soon discovered that that committee was no different from any of the others, that you need a good staff and nonpartisanship.

It has been a tremendous pleasure for me to work with Senator PAT ROBERTS of Kansas. We have worked through some very difficult issues while we have served as chairman and ranking member of the committee. As we all know, Senator ROBERTS has a great sense of humor. But that sense of humor is never, ever in the way of doing the right thing for this institution. He is a person who served for many decades in the Congress, and his service here in the Senate has been a rewarding one for Members of the Senate because he has brought his experience from the House and made this place a better institution. I can speak with authority in that regard as a result of how he handled himself on the Ethics Committee during the time he and I served as chairman and ranking member or vice versa.

It is a disappointment to me that he is no longer chairman of that committee, but the rules are such that he could not serve in that capacity while serving in the same capacity on another committee. I look forward to working with Senator VOINOVICH, who has replaced him. I only hope that he is half as good in that capacity as Senator ROBERTS. If that is the case, the Senate will be well served.

The Senate Ethics Committee is truly a unique committee. Unlike other committees, it is comprised of an

even number of Democrats and Republicans. It is led by a chair and vice chair. The staff is entirely nonpartisan. Most significantly, the committee's obligation is to ensure that Members of this body adhere to the high ethical standards expected of them as Members of the Senate. This is an obligation that transcends partisan political differences.

I have had the honor of serving on the Ethics Committee for a long time. I have had the privilege of being both the chair and the vice chair of the committee. Throughout all my time, however, the individual responsible for the day-to-day management of this committee has been Victor Baird. In fact, Victor has served on the Ethics Committee since 1987 as the staff director and chief counsel.

He has guided the committee through some of its most controversial cases. Regardless of the case or the controversy, however, Victor Baird could be relied on to steer the committee with a degree of impartiality, calmness, and firmness that will be a model for his successors.

It is significant to note that Victor Baird is leaving the Ethics Committee to enjoy a rich and deserved retirement. His career path is a tribute to those who look at public service as a possibility.

Prior to coming to the Senate, Victor served on the Consumers' Utility Council of Georgia, was an administrative law judge in Georgia, and served as an assistant attorney general of Georgia.

He also is another son of Georgia who found his calling in public service and is finishing his career serving the greatest deliberative body in the world. Like other Georgians in the Senate, Victor enjoyed a distinguished career in the U.S. military. He was honorably discharged in 1970 from the U.S. Air Force and was a recipient of the Bronze Star. During his 3 years in the Air Force, he served as a meteorologist and was responsible for predicting tropical storms. I am sure the storms that came after he took this job at the Ethics Committee were certainly more than any of the storms he saw in the non-political environment. I am sure that Victor's ability to forecast stormy weather served him well in the Senate.

Victor Baird's professional career is marked by serving the public. That alone deserves our commendation. It is unfortunate today that public service is viewed as a short-time venture for some, but I believe it is a noble calling. The financial rewards are few and the hours can be very long. Those who commit their lives to public service retire knowing their work, no matter how great or how small, has contributed to the betterment of society. That alone is a reward that cannot be quantified in dollars.

Mr. President, on behalf of the Senate, I wish to thank Victor Baird for his 15 years of service on the Select Committee on Ethics. Victor's contributions to the betterment of this institution are significant. The Senate