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Senate

The Senate met at 2 p.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. HATCH).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Gracious God, Ruler of all nature, Your strong right hand continues to sustain us. The Earth belongs to You and everything in it.

Today, inspire our Senators to trust fervently in You. Lord, show them the path that leads to success in their many endeavors. Guide them with Your truth and plant Your secrets of joy in the soil of their hearts. May integrity and honesty protect them as they put their hope in You. Let Your wisdom sound a clarion call in their minds so they will glorify You with faithful service. Fill them with an attitude of gratitude.

We pray in Your merciful Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. PORTMAN). Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business for debate only, with Senators permitted to speak therein.

The Senator from Utah, the President pro tempore.

TAX REFORM

Mr. HATCH. Mr. President, I rise to discuss once again the ongoing effort to reform our Nation's Tax Code.

I have been coming to the floor regularly to talk about this subject for more than 6 years, and, during that time, more and more Americans have recognized the need to fix our broken and outdated tax system. Members of Congress from both parties have similarly acknowledged that, when it comes to our Tax Code, the status quo is untenable.

President Trump has made tax reform one of his top priorities, which is essential. Presidential leadership on tax reform has been sorely lacking in the past. Of course, for some the involvement of the President in this endeavor complicates matters. Indeed, some of my friends on the other side of the aisle are, by all appearances, bound and determined to block the passage of any part of President Trump's agenda even if, in terms of policy, there is common ground and it is good for all Americans. Still, I welcome the involvement of the President in this effort and hope that more and more of my colleagues will eventually do the same.

Today I want to take a few minutes to rebut the growing narrative in the media and elsewhere that tax reform is going to be a secretive exercise, involving the input of only a few key players.

True enough, there have been meetings involving the administration, House and Senate leaders, and tax writers in recent weeks, wherein we have been discussing tax reform at a high level in an effort to reach some agreement. However, while this process may result in an agreed upon framework, this will not be the be-all and end-all of tax reform. On the contrary, as chairman of the Senate's tax-writing committee, I am committed to ensuring a robust process in the Senate for developing, considering, and passing any tax reform package. That is

how the Senate functions best, and that is what I intend to see happen.

Toward that end, I have been working to involve all of the Republican members of the Senate Finance Committee in this effort. We have a number of great Senators on the committee, many of whom have put in years of work on different areas of the tax system. I think it would be foolish to let that experience and expertise go to waste, especially at this time in our lives. Every Republican on the committee is involved in this process, and I have asked some Senators to focus on particular areas.

For example, I have asked Senators ENZI and PORTMAN to focus on the international tax system. This issue is essential. Our antiquated international tax system leaves American businesses at a decidedly competitive disadvantage, and it is one of the main drivers behind the stream of inversions and foreign takeovers we have seen in recent years. Both of these Senators have put in a lot of time and a lot of work on this issue in developing proposals for a better path forward, and some of that development in the past has occurred with substantive input from our Democratic friends. With both Senators ENZI and PORTMAN working on this issue, I think we can and will see significant progress.

In addition, I have asked Senator GRASSLEY, a former Finance Committee chairman himself and currently chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, to take a look at our individual tax system. I think most of us here in Congress—and not just on the Republican side—would like to see a tax reform bill that reduces the tax burden on middle-class individuals and families. I think Senator GRASSLEY and others will put their experience to good use.

● This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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Likewise, Senator THUNE has quite a bit of experience and expertise when it comes to the business tax system, and he has done a lot of work over the years to reform the estate tax. So I have asked him to provide his thoughts and advice as we work through these issues.

I have asked Senators HELLER and CASSIDY to work on solutions for energy tax policy. Similarly, I have asked Senator ROBERTS to find solutions to tax issues relating to agriculture.

There are other issues out there, as well, and over time I intend to enlist the help of other committee members to focus on particular tax issues and provide advice and assistance on crafting suitable reforms.

So, as you can see, the idea that tax reform is going to be a closed-door exercise is absurd, at least as things pertain to the Senate. Every Republican member of the Senate Finance Committee is involved in this effort.

Of course, we will need to go beyond the committee as well. There are Members throughout the conference with particular interests and expertise relating to tax policy. Many of my colleagues have introduced bills over the years and have become outspoken advocates on a number of key issues. I want those Members to be involved as well.

Just to be clear, I do not think this process should be limited to just Republican input. I want to see Democrats at the table. I want a bipartisan process that renders a bipartisan result. I think the relevant leaders from the administration have said much the same thing.

I have reached out to my Democratic colleagues on the Finance Committee and invited them to participate. Once again, I do not believe this process has to be limited to the committee. Any Member of the Senate, from either party, should have an opportunity to express his or her views and ideas and have them considered as part of this process.

I am willing to sit down and work with anyone who wants to be a good-faith participant in this endeavor and who wants, ultimately, to see it succeed. After all, we have had years and years of bipartisan efforts, including working groups and reports, to find common ground. Recently, however, we have not been hearing much from our Democratic colleagues and friends when it comes to tax reform.

We have heard some of the usual accusations that Republicans are hell-bent on giving massive tax breaks to the super wealthy and inflicting some harm or another on the middle class—total bullcorn but, nevertheless, a constant theme by those on the other side. It is a constant, annoying theme by those on the other side.

We have also heard some process demands that some have set as preconditions for any real bipartisan tax reform discussions. All too often, those

preconditions either reflect a lack of willingness to compromise or outright demands for things that are unrelated to tax reform.

In other words, we have heard our colleagues cite a number of reasons as to why they do not want to work with us on tax reform, and I suspect that, to some degree, this false narrative about secrecy and closed doors on tax reform will be added to the list. But I will say it again: I am willing to work with anyone—Republican or Democrat—in this effort. If anyone doubts my sincerity, I think my record for bipartisanship and compromise should speak for itself.

Long story short, my goal on tax reform is to draft and pass a bill with the broadest possible support and input from all who are interested in helping put our economy on a sustained, higher growth path. To do that, I think we need a vigorous and open debate in the Senate, which, in my view, should include a full process in committee and regular order on the Senate floor. At the end of this process, no one should be able to credibly claim that he was unable to participate or that he did not have enough information about the bill.

So I hope this puts to rest any claims or suppositions that the tax reform process is going to be secretive in nature, because, if I have my way, this process is going to be open, fair, and joint. It will be open, and it will be bipartisan.

The goal of everyone in this body, with respect to tax reform, ought to be to help the American people by providing tax relief to American families, simplifying the tax system, improving our business tax system to allow American businesses to compete in the global economy, and creating stronger growth in the economy, wages, jobs, and opportunity.

I hope more of my colleagues will join me in supporting this important effort. It is important that we work our Tax Code out. It is a mess. It is not working. Too many people feel oppressed by it. A lot of our Members of the Senate do not feel very good about our current Tax Code. I do not feel good about it either. I think we need to get together as people who really want to help this country out and want to do the best for our constituents—whether they are Democrats, Republicans, Independents, or whatever—and do it the right way.

I just hope we can get enough interest on both sides of the floor to be able to do what really needs to be done in this very crucial area, and I intend to see that we do. As chairman of the tax-writing committee, we are going to do it. I just hope that I will have some support from the other side, as well, and that they will dig in and present their viewpoints and give us their ideas and help to mold and modify and work and improve and decide what is great in any tax approach that we take.

This is the greatest country in the world. We have the greatest economy

in the world. We have the greatest opportunities in the world, but we can certainly hurt every one of those aspects of our lives if we do not handle the tax reform issue properly and if we do not handle taxes properly. I think it is important that we get together, work together, and get rid of some of the churlish stupidity that occasionally exists around this place and start doing what is best for the United States of America and best for all of our supporters, best for all of our constituents, and best for the world, really, because, if the United States is strong and powerful, the rest of the world will be better off.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

BETTER CARE RECONCILIATION BILL

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I would like to read a few headlines from the past couple of weeks.

From the Detroit Free Press: “ObamaCare rates in Michigan could skyrocket as much as 31 percent in 2018.”

This is from the Associated Press: “New Mexico health insurer proposes 80 percent premium hike.”

From the Washington Examiner: “CMS: 47 counties won’t have ObamaCare coverage in 2018.”

From Bloomberg: “Anthem to Leave ObamaCare Markets in Indiana and Wisconsin.”

From the Washington Free Beacon: “Last Insurer in Delaware Requests Rate Hike of 33.6 Percent for 2018.”

These headlines should probably be shocking—an 80-percent premium increase; 47 counties without an insurer—but they are not. Insurers leaving the market, huge premium hikes, lack of coverage—that is par for the course for ObamaCare. Unfortunately, too many Americans have gotten used to those types of headlines. I have lost count how many times I have come down to the floor to read similar headlines.

While these headlines may not be shocking anymore, they are still disturbing. Behind these stories are tens of thousands of struggling Americans who can no longer afford the ObamaCare premiums, Americans who are losing their healthcare plan again, Americans who are worried they won’t have any coverage options at all for 2018. ObamaCare may have been well-intentioned, but good intentions are not enough.

ObamaCare was fatally flawed from the beginning, and it is rapidly imploding. We can do one of two things: We can just wait around for the exchanges