

The New York Times

Liberal Base Proves Trying to Democrats

October 12, 2007

CONGRESSIONAL MEMO

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 11 — Of the three most recognizable Barneyes in America, one is a singing purple dinosaur, another is a prehistoric cartoon character and the third is a gay congressman from Massachusetts.

Representative Barney Frank, the Massachusetts Democrat, is as closely tied to the issue of gay rights as Barney Rubble is to Fred Flintstone. But recently, Mr. Frank has been under siege by gay rights groups.

They are angry because Mr. Frank has removed specific language about “gender identity” from the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, a bill that would protect gay men and lesbians in the workplace and that gay rights advocates say would now leave [transsexuals](#) and transgender individuals vulnerable.

There is almost no chance that President Bush would ever sign the bill. But the bitter tug of war between gay groups and one of their best friends on Capitol Hill is the latest example of how Democrats in Congress, since regaining majority control this year, have been torn between making compromises needed to pass legislation and satisfying the unrelenting demands of the party’s liberal base.

Mr. Frank, in an hourlong news conference on Thursday, defended himself and said he would press ahead with the bill knowing that by not including the transgender language he could attract enough votes to get it approved. But he also expressed frustration that the Democrats were hampering themselves.

“There is a tendency in American politics for the people who feel most passionately about an issue, particularly ones that focus on a single issue, to be unrealistic in what a democratic political system can deliver,” Mr. Frank said, “and that can be self-defeating.”

“This is a moment of truth for responsible liberals in the [Democratic Party](#),” he added.

The tension between Democratic lawmakers and their base has been most visible on the Iraq war, where the insistence by some of the most outspoken antiwar groups on setting hard deadlines for the withdrawal of American troops has often handcuffed Senate Democrats trying to reach a bipartisan deal on legislation to change the war strategy.

To the delight of Republicans, it has also played a role in a host of other issues, including a fight over increased fuel economy standards in the energy bill, and demands for more spending on environmental programs in the farm bill.

Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) disappointed Democrats seeking major changes to the federal farm subsidy program — changes that Ms. Pelosi had supported in the past. Instead she adopted a

more moderate approach that made some changes but left most of the subsidies intact and that she called “a good first step.”

On the energy bill, the Democrats struggled to navigate the demands of two powerful factions in their base: organized labor groups tied to the auto industry and environmental groups. Representative [John D. Dingell](#), Democrat of Michigan, thwarted Ms. Pelosi’s efforts to increase fuel efficiency standards.

The liberal group [MoveOn.org](#) started a campaign that included radio advertising branding Mr. Dingell, who is 81, “Dingellsaurus” for opposing the energy standards that the group said would combat [global warming](#).

Representative Adam H. Putnam of Florida, chairman of the House Republican Conference, said Democrats were struggling with tensions between the party’s liberal wing, which provided money and support for the 2006 elections, and the views of many freshmen Democrats who won office in moderate or conservative districts.

“The freshmen who actually won seats in districts that had voted for Bush, in conservative-moderate districts, having nothing in common with Code Pink or MoveOn,” Mr. Putnam said, referring to the antiwar groups.

“The base turns on them in every single case,” he added. “So at some point they have to stop falling into the trap of constantly playing to the base and try to solve problems.”

Democrats point to a series of legislative achievements this year, including an increase in the minimum wage, new lobbying and ethics rules, and an overhaul of student-aid programs, and a spokesman for Ms. Pelosi, Brendan Daly, said she was providing responsible leadership.

“One of the things she says is that an activist — that’s their role to be persistent and unsatisfied and try to push the envelope,” Mr. Daly said. “But when you are in a position of leading, in Congress, you have to be realistic at some point.”

Sometimes, though, the in-fighting can seem unreal, as with the recent fury directed by gay groups at Mr. Frank.

“[Barney Frank](#) is not gay enough?” asked Representative Thaddeus McCotter, Republican of Michigan, one of the most conservative members of the House .

Even Mr. Frank acknowledged the weirdness. “The likelihood that somebody is going to run against me in my district on the grounds that I have been insufficiently pro-gay is not very high on my list of concerns,” he said.

He has put gender identity protections in a separate bill that is not expected to be acted upon this year.

But many gay rights groups said they were truly angry and bewildered, especially because the compromise involves a bill unlikely to be signed by Mr. Bush. A coalition of some 280 groups sent Mr. Frank a letter urging him to include gender identity in the bill to be voted on soon. **“What we are talking about is stripping out a part of our community for a symbolic vote, which in our opinion does not advance the struggle for civil rights for our people,”** said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

“If the goal here is for the new majority to demonstrate that it is responding to a core constituency,” Mr. Foreman said, “passing a non-inclusive bill is not going to accomplish that.”

Some Republicans in the House have said they wished Mr. Frank had included the language on transgender and transsexual people because it would have made it easier for them to vote against the bill.

Mr. Frank, at his news conference, said that including gender identity would kill the bill while approving a compromise measure would be a momentous step. “It is an important sign to the rest of the country that we are making progress,” he said.

“On the other hand,” he continued, “an announcement that this new Democratic Congress led by a woman who has been as committed to full rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in every aspect of her career, that she had to kill a gay rights bill and couldn’t do anything at all would, I think, be the most negative message we could send.”