

When I first came to the Senate, the Irish-American clubs of Chicago came to me and suggested we should have a postage stamp that would acknowledge the contribution of Irish immigrants to America. I was surprised it had never happened. So the first phone call I made in the Senate was to my colleague, Senator TED KENNEDY. If there is anything dealing with Irish Americans, you better get TED KENNEDY on board. He thought it was a great idea. So we worked together, and we were successful.

The Postal Commission decided to commission a commemorative stamp commemorating the immigration of the Irish to Chicago. TED and I tried to decide which one of us would announce the stamp. By seniority, he was able to announce the first-day issue in Boston, the same day I would unveil the stamp in Chicago.

I thought to myself: Who will I invite from this city of so many great Irish Americans to come and represent those of that ethnic origin at the unveiling of the stamp? I looked around at some of the obvious: Father John Smith of Maryville, the institution I mentioned earlier, who did so much to help so many young children; Sister Rosemary of Misericordia Center, just an amazing, wonderful, and warm, touching center for children who were born with mental affliction and mental illness. I thought of Father Jim Close, who runs Mercy Home for boys and girls in Chicago. I thought what a great contribution he made. I thought of my pastor from my parish, Father Jack Wall from old Saint Pat's, a downtown parish that serves so many people in that community. But I also thought of Father Mac.

I brought them all together. They were up there with me on that stage when we unveiled the stamp. When I got up, I said: If you want to know the contribution of the Irish people to the city of Chicago, look at these five people and the dedication of their lives and what they have done to help so many people. Had the Irish been pushed away and shunned from coming to America, would someone else have stepped into their roles?

I thought about that again when Father Mac passed away. He took an assignment most priests would not even consider: going to those mean streets, those poor areas of Chicago. That was his ministry. How many times would each one of us, as we are walking along with our family on the street, see someone who is obviously intoxicated or sick with addiction and maybe pick up our pace and walk a little faster? For Father Mac, that is exactly when he would slow down and stop to try to determine what he could do.

He dedicated his life to these people. There were so many amazing stories that came from it, lives that were saved, people who were given a chance to succeed. When he opened the Haymarket Center—it is right behind Greek Town in Chicago, if you happen

to know the city a little bit. It used to be a part of the city that mainly was warehouses. Now it is becoming pretty gentrified with a lot of lofts and condominiums, with a lot of people moving in, a lot of trendy restaurants, but when it was one of the poorest parts of Chicago, Father Mac established Haymarket Center because that is where he could find the people who needed his help.

I have been there several times. He had a little chapel in Haymarket where he would hold mass on Sundays, and many people came to join him at that little service. As they walked around Haymarket Center, they understood that even though those were some of the poorest people in some of the worst places in our city, Father Mac always treated them as his brothers and sisters. He went out of his way to give them the dignity and attention they deserved.

Those of us who were privileged to have known Father Mac will remember his wonderful ability to always see good in people and to convince those same people not to give up on themselves. He was a visionary, he was a leader, and he was a friend. But he was more. When I think back on my life, on those I have met who made a profound impression on me and who if they did not reach the level of sainthood were knocking at the door, Father Mac was one of those people.

I extend my deepest condolences to all of those who join me in treasuring the fond memories of Monsignor Ignatius McDermott. We start the new year with a heavy heart but with a renewed commitment that each of us in some small way will try to continue the ministry of this wonderful man.

I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SUNUNU). The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CORNYN). Without objection, it is so ordered.

ASBESTOS LEGISLATION

Mr. SPECTER. Mr. President, I have sought recognition to discuss briefly the status of efforts to have asbestos tort reform legislation, a matter which has been before the Congress of the United States for more than two decades.

I had my first contact with the issue back in 1984 when then-Senator Gary Hart of Colorado brought in a constituent to talk about asbestos. It has been an issue which we have labored with long and hard, and in the last Congress, Senator HATCH, Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, advanced legislation with the concept of a trust and a schedule of payments to avoid the costs and risks of litigation and to

treat asbestos injuries very much like workers' compensation.

A bill was passed out of the Judiciary Committee last July, pretty much on a party-line vote, as the distinguished Presiding Officer, Senator CORNYN of Texas, knows because he was and is on the Judiciary Committee and did a prodigious amount of work on this issue. The bill was passed out with a number of problems. I voted for it to move it along. I then enlisted the assistance of the former Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, Edward R. Becker, who was in senior status. Judge Becker convened a large group of so-called stakeholders in his chamber. For two full days in August, he met in his chambers with representatives of the manufacturers, representatives of the AFL-CIO, representatives of the insurance industry, the reinsurance industry, and trial lawyers to start to work through a large number of problems which appeared to be intractable. We have worked through many of those problems, but some still remain.

There had been some talk about a draft bill being offered, but it is not appropriate to offer legislation until later this month under the procedures established by the majority leader, and the proposed draft legislation is not quite ready, although a great deal of work has been done on it.

There have been major issues raised as to what the total amount of the trust fund should be. There have been issues raised as to how much money should be in the startup fund; how long the trust fund ought to function before giving the claimants the right to revert to the judicial system because the legislation necessarily takes away their right to jury trial in consideration of a certain amount of money to be paid under the trust fund; and the problems that many victims are having where they are unable to collect from anyone—people with mesothelioma, a deadly disease, with cancer, with many ailments from the exposure to asbestos.

This would be the offset to giving up the right to a jury trial.

We have adopted an approach of reverting back to the right to jury trial if the elaborate system does not work. I think the system is realistically calculated to be successful.

Following the meetings in Judge Becker's chambers last August, there have been some 32 sessions held in my conference room, presided over by Judge Becker with myself in attendance for most of those meetings.

To repeat, a lot of progress has been made. It is my hope to be able to circulate a draft bill as a vehicle for discussion. I call it a discussion draft bill. My hope is that it could be circulated before the end of the week, but it is not possible to make any firm commitments because candidly every time we come upon a sequence of negotiations, other problems arise. If there is any way to reconcile them and to have a consensus before going into print, we are trying to do that.

It had been my hope last year, as we worked through the process, to have a bill by consensus. Senator FRIST and the then-Democratic leader, Senator DASCHLE, did a great deal of work and exchanged letters. At one point we thought we were on the verge of a consensus, but it did not work out.

In order to pass a bill, as we all know, in the last stages of a legislative session, it has to be by consensus because any single Senator can hold up a bill in its final stages. That consensus was not possible, and although we were very close on many issues, there are some issues where there is still some difference of opinion. The differences have been narrowed, and we have come a long way.

It is my hope to circulate a draft discussion bill, and there likely will still be some blanks. We will fill in as many of the blanks as we can, and then Judge Becker and I will be available to meet with the stakeholders in my conference room on Monday to talk about the areas where there has been agreement, to talk about the specifics on a draft discussion bill, and to talk about the areas where there are still differences as to how we might bridge that gap.

I have worked with Senator LEAHY. I commend him for his work with Chairman HATCH on this matter. We have talked about having a hearing next Tuesday on January 11. I am not unaware of the fact that it is not a convenient time, but Senator LEAHY will be present and I think there will be some other Senators present. We have given several weeks notice. We are aware it is a difficult time, but there are many hearings held in the Senate with just a few Senators, the chairman, and the ranking member present. I think it is important to move ahead.

At that time, it is the expectation that we will hear testimony from Judge Becker to lay out the draft discussion bill and then to hear testimony from the stakeholders identifying the parts of the bill which they choose to comment about where there are agreements or where there are disagreements. We know from experience that the early part of a legislative session is necessarily slow, but that early on in February, certainly in March, sometimes by mid-February, we begin to move ahead and the calendar begins to be crowded.

There are many items which the President has identified as legislative priorities. We will have confirmation hearings starting with White House Counsel Gonzales on Thursday and there will be other confirmation hearings. So it is my hope to be able to present a bill through markup at a very early date. Whether that can be done in late January or early February, frankly, remains to be seen.

When we marked up this bill the last Thursday of July of 2003, it was a very long markup. It lasted more than 12 hours, as the distinguished Presiding Officer will recollect. In a sense, we

had the longest markup in the history of the Senate with the sessions in Judge Becker's chambers and the 32 sessions in my conference room. I thought it would be useful to briefly describe where we have been and in a sense where we are going so our colleagues will know what the status is as fully as it can be described without actually circulating a draft discussion of the bill, which will be done at the earliest possible time.

I thank the Chair. I commend him for his lonely vigil. This was a thriving Chamber three hours ago with standing room only and suddenly the business of the Senate is not quite so pressing with only the Presiding Officer and this Senator present. So in the absence of any other Senator, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CRAPO). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be allowed to speak for as much time as I consume.

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

DELIVERING SOLUTIONS TO THE NATION'S PROBLEMS

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I would like to take a few minutes to expand on what I discussed at the outset of this session, now about 3 hours ago. I would like to focus not just on what we must do as individual Senators, but also on what this Senate can do and can achieve together, as a body. With the President and the House as partners, we can deliver meaningful solutions to the real problems that confront our Nation. We can secure freedom and safety and a healthier future for generations of Americans to come.

We made much progress toward these goals in the last Congress and we did so in a very narrowly divided Senate. Even with the rough and tumble of election year politics, we found ways to work together for the common good of our country. We can, we must, and I believe we will achieve at least the same and hopefully even greater success in the Senate.

No doubt it will be a challenge. The makeup of this Senate is unique. The margins between the majority and the minority may be wider, but the margins at the ends of the ideological spectrum are wider still.

We also have our own prerogatives as equals, as individual Senators, as members of our respective caucuses. And we have principles, principles to which I hope each and every one of us will hold tight during the next 2 years and throughout our careers in public service. But we also have an obligation to

this body and to the people and to the Nation we serve to conduct that business with civility and with foresight and a sharp focus on those meaningful solutions. The agenda before us is simply too ambitious, too urgent, and too important to the future of our country and the world to do otherwise. Every Member of this body can take pride in the accomplishments of the last Congress, the 108th Congress. We took on big issues. We took on huge challenges. And our actions translated into solutions. Together we proudly moved America forward.

For years Congress talked about providing seniors with relief from the skyrocketing cost of prescription drugs through Medicare. Finally, in 2003, Congress took action and passed the first substantial improvement to Medicare since the program was created 40 years ago. Today, more than 6 million seniors have prescription drug discount cards that are saving them 10 percent to 25 percent on their medicines; tens of thousands more are signing up every week; and within 12 months every senior on Medicare will have affordable access to a comprehensive prescription drug benefit. Challenge; action; solutions.

Before President Bush took office, our economy was tilting toward recession. Then the Internet bubble burst, corporate scandals rattled investor confidence, and terrorist attacks devastated our economy. We took action. We cut taxes for every American who pays taxes and we reduced taxes on businesses, helping them invest and expand and be more competitive in the global economy. Since August 2003, our businesses have created over 2.4 million jobs, we reduced the unemployment rate from a peak of 6.3 percent last June to 5.4 percent today, and aftertax income is up by more than 10 percent since 2000. Challenge; action; solutions.

On September 11, 2001, the United States was ruthlessly and brutally attacked by terrorists. More than 3,000 innocent men, women, and children were murdered. America and indeed the world changed forever. I am proud of the support this body has given to our Commander in Chief and the brave men and women who risk their lives every day to defend our country. We provided \$87 billion to help our military buy equipment and support operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. To date, our forces have killed or captured three quarters of al Qaida's leadership. They have toppled two terrorist regimes, and in the process they have liberated 50 million people and put them on the path to self-government.

The Senate also adopted the most sweeping overhaul of our intelligence system since the creation of the CIA itself. This will bolster and better organize our intelligence efforts to win the war on terror and face those new security threats of the 21st century. Again: Challenge; action; solutions.

These are just several of the achievements of the last Congress. But the