

people appreciate the influence of government and are informed about the government's role in improving health care for seniors, insuring food safety, discovering medical cures, and protecting the environment.

We should also work to improve public understanding of the way our system works. We should emphasize that the political process is adversarial, untidy and imprecise. Politicians may not be popular, but they are indispensable. Politics is the way that we express the popular will of the people in this country. At its best, our representative democracy gives us a system whereby all of us have a voice in the process and a stake in the product.

While we should work to make government as efficient as possible, we should explain that legislative deliberation and debate—even heated debate—and delay, are important parts of the legislative process. Delay occurs because the issues before the government are very complicated and intensely debated. It's an incredibly difficult job making policy for a country of this vast size and remarkable diversity. It's the job especially of the Congress to give the various sides a chance to be heard and to search for a broadly acceptable consensus. The founders established our system of checks and balances so that policies could not be rammed through the government with little debate or deliberation.

The Council for Excellence in Government, of course, plays a critical role in the area of public education about government. I have been trying to contribute to the effort through The Center on Congress, which I direct at Indiana University. The central mission of the Center is to help improve the public's understanding of Congress—its role in our country, its strengths and weaknesses, and its daily impact on the lives of ordinary Americans. Through newspaper columns, a website, videos, radio segments, and other media, we seek to explain to ordinary people the role and importance of Congress.

Finally, we must also include a dose of civic responsibility. Citizens must understand their own responsibility to be involved in the political process. I was particularly pleased the Council's poll found that a majority of Americans believe citizen engagement is the single most important change necessary to improve government.

My observation is that participation is the best antidote to cynicism. A person who is deeply involved in fighting for a better school board, a safer railroad crossing, or a more effective arms control treaty, is rarely cynical.

Effective government is a two-way street. Our system of government simply does not work very well without popular support and participation.

Freedom is not free.

IV. Optimism

I've recommended a lot of changes today, but let me not mislead you. Like you, I have concerns about declining trust in government. But I am confident that our political system still basically works. It has a remarkable resilience and underlying strength.

Our government needs reforms, and we need to work to rebuild confidence in government, but we do not need a radical overhaul of our institutions.

Given the size and diversity of our country, and the number and complexity of the challenges we confront, it seems to me that representative democracy works reasonably well in America. The system may be—and at times is—slow, messy, cumbersome, complicated, and even unresponsive, but it has

served us well for many years, and continues to do so.

Just think about the condition of our country today. In general I think America is a better place today than it was when I came to Congress almost four decades ago.

The Cold War is over, and we are at peace.

Our economy is thriving and is the envy of the world.

We have greatly improved the lot of older Americans with programs like Social Security and Medicare.

Women and minorities have had new doors opened to them as never before.

The Internet has brought a world of knowledge to the most remote classrooms and homes.

And, most important of all, this is still a land of opportunity where everyone has a chance, not an equal chance unfortunately, but still a chance to become the best they can be.

We must be doing something right.

As I look at the government today, I'm not cynical, pessimistic or discouraged. I'm optimistic about the institutions of government and about the country. I am confident that our government will continue to meet the important challenges we will face in the coming years.

This was indeed the most encouraging finding in the Council's poll this summer—that despite their distrust, Americans still believe that government has an important role to play in the next century, particularly in defense, education, helping senior citizens, medical research, reducing violence and cleaning up the environment. Americans still recognize the importance of government, and look to government to better their lives and our nation.

So the opportunity for improving the relationship between government and the people is clearly there for all of us to seize.

Thank you.

IN RECOGNITION OF THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE OHIO VALLEY CHAPTER OF THE ASSOCIATED BUILDERS AND CONTRACTORS AND OSHA

HON. ROB PORTMAN

OF OHIO

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 14, 2000

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. Speaker, I rise to commend the partnership the Ohio Valley Chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors, Inc. recently forged with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). These two groups have mutually recognized the importance of providing a safe work environment for our nation's construction workforce.

I am pleased to see the federal government and the private sector working so closely toward a common goal—worker safety and health. As part of this innovative partnership, participating contractors from the Ohio Valley chapter will voluntarily improve their current safety and health programs and adhere to a more stringent set of standards. In return, OSHA will recognize contractors who have demonstrated exemplary safety records.

According to the agreement, ABC and OSHA will take positive steps together, such as: maintaining an open communications pol-

icy at the regional, chapter, and national levels; sharing knowledge of the best industry technology, innovations, and practices that improve safety; cooperating in the development and improvement of safety programs; ensuring that policies and practices are effective, consistent, and fair; and promoting the principles of good faith and fair dealings.

This agreement is good for ABC contractors, OSHA, and most importantly, workers on the job site. I firmly believe that commonsense partnerships such as these, characterized by cooperation and communication, will best serve those it was meant to help—the worker.

MOTHER NATURE WAITS ON NO ONE

HON. LOUISE McINTOSH SLAUGHTER

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 14, 2000

Ms. SLAUGHTER. Mr. Speaker, oil prices have tripled since the end of 1998 and are higher than they have been in nearly a decade. Today in response, I am cosponsoring legislation that is an aggressive response to the reduction in oil produced by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) nations. This legislation would direct the Administration to file a case with the World Trade Organization (WTO) against oil-producing countries. Article XI of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) prohibits members of the WTO from setting quantitative restrictions on imports or exports. I believe oil-producing countries' production limits fall within this Article, therefore these countries have violated the rules of the WTO. With the majority of oil-producing nations already members of the WTO or in the process of applying for membership, a complaint filed by the United States would have an immediate impact on the current and future behavior of these countries.

This particular crisis has to be investigated. I consider these actions a shameful display of ingratitude on the part of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, after Americans put their lives on the line to safeguard the stability and oil fields of these nations in the Gulf War.

I was pleased with Secretary Richardson's efforts to meet with oil industry representatives and OPEC members, but I frankly think that the cautious approach that the White House is taking is still too little and too late. We know that actions will speak louder than words.

The people that I represent in Monroe County, New York, have the dubious distinction this year of having had more snow than any place else in the United States. My constituents were then especially hard hit by the high heating oil and diesel fuel costs this winter. Now, the rest of the country is being affected by the soaring cost of gasoline. These enormous oil price increases pose a significant threat to our nation's continued economic growth by increasing the likelihood of inflation and the costs of doing business.

So, on behalf of all my constituents today who are still shoveling snow, paying their heating oil bills and now paying these high gas prices, I want to say to my colleagues and