

Ways & Means Chairman Explains His Trade Legislation Philosophy

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Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, is determined to work in a bi-partisan way on trade legislation impacting manufacturers. Rangel was contemplating not running again for Congress last November if Democrats didn't get the majority, "not because I wanted to have the power of the chairman, but because I couldn't tolerate the whole idea that going to work meant which fight were you going to participate in and not which bill were you going to try to get passed," he told a recent meeting of the National Press Club.

Rangel spent years complaining about the inability of the two parties to work together on legislation, amendments and hearings. "So I had a friend in the White House (Treasury Secretary) Hank Paulson, and I knew that he was leaving in two years and also knew that he had the jurisdiction in the executive branch that I would enjoy in the Ways and Means Committee. I told him that there was a time when the Ways and Means Committee had camaraderie because the complexity of the legislation that came to our committee partisanship had no [bearing on] any problem that we faced. Then, as now, I cannot conceive of having a trade bill that would be partisan or thinking that there was a Democratic or Republican way to solve tax complexities or the Social Security problems that we have."

When he became chairman earlier this year, Rangel said he wanted to start working with Republican Rep. Jim McCrery (La.), the new ranking minority member of the committee. "I didn't even know who the hell McCrery was," he told the Press Club luncheon. "I mean, I knew the name, and the only time I ever heard from him was when I took a shot or two at [former Ways and Means Committee chairman Bill] Thomas [(R-Calif.)], and McCrery would defend him. But I hardly listened to his response."

Rangel met with McCrery and told him that the "Republicans had nowhere to go - they had no coattails for the next election, and we Democrats had not proven or had the opportunity to prove that we earned the right to be in the majority." The two decided that problems could not be solved in a partisan way. The two men became fast friends.

"We go to meetings together," said Rangel. "As a matter of fact, I invited him to come here. Since this is a prestigious newsmakers [event], I thought since my dull speech wouldn't make news that if I showed up with the Republican minority member, that would make news. I told him that and he said I should feel free to tell you that he would have enjoyed being here with me this afternoon, but since he heard on some TV show called 'Power Lunch' that I had been kind to him, that he was going to be on that show saying nice things about me."

That strong sense of bi-partisanship hasn't earned Rangel many friends in the "fair" trade community. They label his trade policy issued on May 10 as being a "Death Star" deal.

"Not one union, small business, environmental or faith group supports it," says a flier that was circulated throughout Capitol Hill. "Big business loves it."

The secretly negotiated deal to facilitate passage of trade agreements with Peru and Panama was put together with Rangel and "big corporate lobbies working to restore a GOP majority such as the Chamber of Commerce, National Association of Manufacturers and National Retail Federation, which praise the bill," says the flier. "Like the Death Star of Star Wars lore, this 'deal' to revive Bush's stalled middle class-crushing trade agenda could wreak unimaginable damage in one blast."

Rangel said the Democratic leadership in the House has given him the independence to pursue his trade agenda and the same holds true of the Republican leadership with McCrery. "We haven't had any problem with our leadership," said Rangel. "But we don't have any reason to believe that if we are able through our leadership on this committee to bring our committee members [to agreement], which has been absolutely remarkable, that it would put our leaders in the position that they would realize that what we are doing would be good for the Congress and would be good for the country. We don't know how much we have in our savings accounts of comity, but we're prepared to use it if we think that we can win."