

House GOP Gathering Again to Discuss Future

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House Republican leaders are set to face members of their Conference today for what is expected to be a frank discussion of the party's course.

The special meeting of the House GOP is being held at the urging of Members such as Republican Study Committee Chairman Jeb Hensarling (Texas), who last week asked his fellow RSC members to attend the meeting to discuss "how best to go forward and define House Republicans."

Republican leadership aides said Members didn't feel they had ample time to express their views about where the party is headed during two GOP Conference meetings last week, amid the fallout of the party's third consecutive special election loss.

"A lot of Members last week didn't feel like they had the opportunity to vent," said one leadership aide. "This will give them the opportunity to vent. ... And it needs to happen."

The aide also said, "Many of the Members in our Conference think we're rudderless right now, and they're right — we are kind of rudderless."

Many Republicans have bemoaned that everyone is talking about what the party should do, while not spending enough time on planning how to stave off widespread defeats in the fall elections.

There is also growing frustration behind the scenes with Minority Leader John Boehner's (R-Ohio) leadership style, which is based more on consensus-building and getting input from all sides.

Last week, Republican leaders unveiled a long-awaited set of agenda items that they will begin rolling out issue by issue, beginning this week with an energy platform.

But many GOP lawmakers, lobbyists and aides privately panned those principles for not being bold enough. While they might be a good starting point, more needs to be done to break away from President Bush's Republican brand and catch voters' attention.

Hensarling, on behalf of the RSC, will offer an alternative action plan at today's meeting that will address boilerplate issues such as spending, taxes, energy, health care and education.

Rep. Bob Inglis (R-S.C.) also plans to hand out his action plan "America Wins" to Members, arguing the changes the party needs to make are not easy ones.

"What needs to change among Republicans, and especially leadership, is there's the need for a) boldness and b) a willingness to say some things that may be uncomfortable for some of our folks," Inglis said, which means going further than saying only what will make it easiest to raise money from traditional GOP constituencies.

"It's about reaching out beyond that comfort zone and finding support by showing a willingness to honestly seek solutions," he said.

Specifically, Inglis pointed to illegal immigration and drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as examples of issues where Republicans can choose between offering solutions and letting party rhetoric get in the way.

“If we insist on ANWR, then what we’re saying is: We’re not in the solution business, we’re in the rhetorical business,” he said.

Inglis called the GOP agenda rolled out last week “a rehash” and also took issue with the GOP Conference-led effort to saddle the Democratic majority with the blame for rising gas prices by branding the increase as the “Pelosi premium,” after Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

“Does anyone actually think that one person is responsible for the runup in gas prices? If that’s the case, we’ll have to give her credit if prices come down,” Inglis said, adding that he laughed out loud when he first heard the phrase. “We insult the intelligence of Americans when we try to say to them it’s the Pelosi premium.”

As Republicans pick up the pieces after last week’s loss in a Mississippi special election, it remains unclear the extent of changes in the works at the National Republican Congressional Committee.

Over the weekend, Boehner said on ABC’s “This Week” that NRCC Chairman Tom Cole (Okla.) is staying put as head of the committee.

Boehner and Cole met Friday and talked again on Monday about possible changes.

“They’re continuing to work out the best way forward,” Boehner spokesman Michael Steel said.

Rep.-elect Travis Childers (D-Miss.), who won last week’s special election, will be sworn in today.