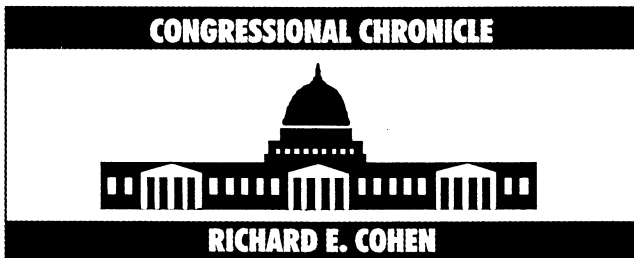


TWO DEMS ARE ON FAMILIAR BATTLEFIELD

Some things never change. John D. Dingell of Michigan and Henry A. Waxman of California—two of the House's most influential Democrats—are clawing at each other again over federal clean air policy. The longtime Commerce Committee adversaries are seeking to influence how the GOP-controlled House and the Clinton White House respond to the toughened clean air enforcement standards that were issued in July by Carol Browner, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator.



During two decades of clean air battles, which have often broken down along regional lines, Dingell has been the skillful leader of the industrial heartland and Waxman has been his worthy nemesis as the chief advocate for pollution victims. Their virtually constant warfare has persisted through major rewrites of the 1970 Clean Air Act in 1977 and 1990. The latest clash, much of which is being waged behind the scenes, involves highly technical questions of how to reduce smokestack pollutants.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the showdown is that the two Democratic adversaries are front and center again, even though few in their party have wielded much influence in the House since the Republicans won the majority in 1994. Most congressional Republicans are hostile to the new EPA rules, but are skittish about challenging them publicly. So they gladly defer to Dingell as their surrogate. Waxman, for his part, shares the environmentalist mantle with moderate Northeast Republicans, but his tactics remain hard-line.

In the past three years, the two Democrats have taken different paths. Dingell—who as chairman of the then-Energy and Commerce Committee suffered a setback in 1994 when his panel failed to agree on a version of President Clinton's health reform plan—has become a personal friend of Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga. Waxman worked with Republicans on some legislation last year. But when he took over as the senior Democrat on the Government Reform and Oversight Committee this year, he moved into a strongly partisan role over that panel's inquiry into 1996 presidential campaign financing.

For weeks, Commerce Committee chairman Thomas J. Bliley Jr., R-Va., and House GOP leaders have mulled whether to wage an indirect challenge to Browner's initiative. They have considered pushing legislation that would set detailed procedures for EPA implementation of the new clean air standards. EPA backers have charged that the measure would hamstring state compliance with the new rules. The bill is sponsored by Democrats Frederick C. Boucher of Virginia and Ron Klink of Pennsylvania and Republican Fred Upton of Michigan—three Dingell allies on the Commerce panel—and has more than 130 co-sponsors, about one-third of whom are Democrats.

Bliley invited foes of the EPA standards to marshal their forces in support of the bill during the August recess. He has said that he expects to decide this month what steps he will take, if

any, on the issue. Bliley and other Republicans, though, were burned politically after they pushed unsuccessfully in 1995 to limit EPA enforcement of existing regulations, and they are carefully weighing the hazards of a new challenge.

Dingell has predicted "very strong support" from both sides of the aisle to limit EPA on this issue. "I'm willing to undertake what is, in all probability, going to be a very nasty fight to save EPA from its own folly," he said in a July 29 speech to the National Press Club. "The new [clean air] standards do not reflect the inescapable result of available science, but simply the judgment of a political appointee."

Waxman responded quickly to the challenge. In an Aug. 4 press release with Reps. Sherwood L. Boehlert, R-N.Y., and Christopher H. Shays, R-Conn., he claimed that more than 145 House Members—enough to sustain a presidential veto—are "clearly supporting the new clean air standards." Waxman and his allies hoped that their announcement would be a slam dunk against the proposal by Dingell's group.

Environmental activists, who have mounted an aggressive grassroots campaign in support of the EPA standards, have said they do not expect the other side to press for legislative action. But they are confident that they will prevail in any case. "Republican leaders don't want to spend their resources on a vote where the outcome is fairly clear in advance," said Philip E. Clapp, president of the Environmental Information Center. "But they are under significant pressure from some Members with IOUs to industry."

Environmentalists have increased the pressure by releasing polling data. In a nationwide survey for Clapp's center in July, Democratic pollster Mark S. Mellman found that 65 per cent of the respondents favored the new EPA standards. "We have found that the environment is as potent an attack issue as were Medicare cuts last year," Mellman said, especially when advocates frame the issue in public health terms. "The issue also has become more directly linked to campaign finance issues because the public believes that votes against the environment are votes for big polluters who give money to candidates."

Nevertheless, opponents of the EPA rules respond that the public has not focused on the details and contend that many voters—including labor union members—are worried about new government regulations that would jeopardize jobs. "Local elected officials have had a groundswell of opposition [to the EPA standards] because they worry about the economic impact," said Teresa Larsen, the director of environmental quality for the National Association of Manufacturers. "Those concerns have been heard by Members of Congress."

Democrats who oppose the EPA regulations reject the environmentalists' view that the public will divide along partisan lines over this issue. Given the public backlash over GOP attempts to rein in the EPA in 1995, "the Republicans' fear is understandable," said Dingell spokesman Dennis B. Fitzgibbons. "But it doesn't apply to this situation because of the bipartisan support" for the new bill. Despite the environmentalist pressures from the Northeast and West Coast, these Democrats add that they must protect their Rustbelt Members to regain the House majority.

Plenty of other uncertainties surround the issue—including the prospective responses of the Senate and the White House, where Browner's initiative generated a mixed reaction, plus the potential impact on Democratic presidential politics in 2000. For now, however, Dingell and Waxman are providing plenty of interest with their reopening of old war wounds. ■