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The Facts of Life in the Capitol: Democrats Vie for Attention Amid One-Party Rule

By Francis X. Clines

Congressional Democrats are wandering the Yellow Brick Road, trying to work their lion's wool into a roar as they vow to confront the Republicans' dominance of government with some "put up yer dukes" ferocity. In the Senate, where most of their dwindling power resides in the limited form of a filibuster threat, the Democrats plan to dust off their policy committee as a vehicle to hold their own oversight hearings. They hope to investigate administration programs and hear from whistle-blowers. They lack the subpoena power the G.O.P. majority can bring to bear on witnesses and issues, but the Democrats are promising to muckrake the status quo the way the Republicans are not.

Taxpayers can only wish them well. But if the senators are serious, they might take a lesson from down the hall in the other chamber, where Congressman Henry Waxman, a California Democrat, has made pestering from the minority side of the aisle an art form for the past 10 years.

Mr. Waxman regularly attracts attention with early warning inquiries into such subjects as the Enron scandal, the State Department's erroneous claim of terrorism's decline and corporate-contract boondoggles in Iraq. His latest project may be too bold for the Democrats who are worried by the supposed power of the moral values lobby, but Mr. Waxman has surveyed the Bush administration's financing of abstinence-only programs and found a laundry list of sexual nonsense being purveyed to teenagers: that genital touching can result in pregnancy, that abortion can lead to sterility and suicide, and that 50 percent of gay teenage boys test positive for the AIDS virus.

With \$170 million budgeted for abstinence-only programs, the congressman is attracting deserved attention with the findings -- rooted out by his staff -- that 11 of the 13 most commonly used curriculums offer teenagers false and distorted information about the effectiveness of contraceptives and the risks of abortion, confuse religion and science, and promote the stereotyping of boys and girls. Comprehensive sex education programs have been shown to decrease pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases among teenagers, Mr. Waxman notes, while graduates of abstinence-only programs tend to make less-informed decisions in their first sexual ventures.

The lesson for the Capitol's frustrated Democratic minority is more about politics than sex. Put some effort into galvanizing curiosity about what's actually going on in government. Mr. Waxman's value as a lone-wolf pest was clear when the Senate majority leader Bill Frist, a Republican, had to concede grudgingly that abstinence-only spending deserved further investigation.