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THE CAUCUS

Serving Since 1955, a House Institution

By **JOHN HARWOOD**

America's new president has collided with this old reality: [Washington](#) likes some kinds of change more than others.

Consider the institution that is Representative [John D. Dingell](#), a Democrat who has represented Detroit since 1955 and who this week becomes the longest-serving House member in history.

Mr. Dingell applauds [President Obama](#)'s drive to expand health care coverage, a cause that he and his congressman father before him have championed since [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) occupied the Oval Office. He has less interest in Mr. Obama's quest to purify the political processes of Pennsylvania Avenue, which last week helped trip up the administration's choice to lead health care reform.

"I'm not one who thinks Washington is an evil place," Mr. Dingell said in his suite at the Rayburn House Office Building. "Bad people do bad things here, but they do them everywhere."

Rather than trying to change the capital, Mr. Dingell concluded, Mr. Obama stands the greatest chance of succeeding "if he were to try to make substantive change that would help people."

Change in the Capital

Washington has changed plenty since Mr. Dingell succeeded his late father in 1955. Congress was comparatively tiny (the younger Mr. Dingell had a single staff member) and was more focused on life in the capital (the 12-hour train ride back to Detroit deterred frequent visits).

A signal change of the past half-century is the growth in both government and Washington's influence industry, which Mr. Obama has now vowed to curb. Mr. Dingell believes that post-Watergate reforms have already proved reasonably effective.

"We're really not doing too bad on process," Mr. Dingell said, citing the news media's watchdog role and the ethics disclosures that lawmakers make each year. "If I lie about it, I've got big trouble."

More troublesome for Mr. Dingell has been the long-term trend toward ideological polarization, making the [Democratic Party](#) less hospitable for members with socially conservative views, like his support for gun rights. When redistricting pitted him against the more liberal Representative Lynn Rivers in a 2002 primary, Representative [Nancy Pelosi](#) of California sent \$10,000 to Ms. Rivers.

Mr. Dingell survived. But like colleagues in both parties, he has chafed under Ms. Pelosi's speakership at the centralization of decision-making within the House leadership. "It started under Gingrich," he said, "and it continues today."

Moreover, the once-mighty seniority system failed to protect his chairmanship of the Energy and Commerce Committee against an intraparty challenge late last year. Representative [Henry A. Waxman](#) of California, promising a more energetic advocacy of Mr. Obama's agenda, prevailed in the Democratic caucus over an older rival who had helped enact [Lyndon B. Johnson's](#) Great Society agenda.

"The curse of this business is that they'll primarily remember you for how long you were here, rather than for what you did," Mr. Dingell said. But even now, he added, "I can do things whether I'm a chairman or not."

An 11th President

Mr. Obama, born six years after Mr. Dingell entered the House, is the 11th president he has served under. The "terrifying challenges" Mr. Obama faces, Mr. Dingell said, may rival those that Roosevelt and John Dingell Sr. confronted when they arrived in Washington after the 1932 election.

Mr. Dingell waved off pundits' conclusions that last week's delay in the economic stimulus legislation reflects miscues by the young chief executive. "The Senate is the home of trouble for legislation," he said. "I'm impressed with the job he has done."

Some House liberals still fear that Mr. Dingell, an inveterate champion of the domestic auto industry, will impede Mr. Obama's push to undo America's dependence on fossil fuels. Yet he is an unequivocal ally on expanding health care coverage, a cause his father embraced beginning in 1943.

"The fact that you've been here doesn't mean you're not for change," he said. That is why he was dismayed by [Tom Daschle's](#) withdrawal as the nominee to become health and human services secretary, which occurred amid a furor over his previously unpaid taxes and the wealth he amassed after leaving office as the Senate majority leader.

"My judgment is it's going to be a substantial blow" to chances for health care reform, Mr. Dingell said. "It's going to hurt my efforts."

But at age 82 he presses on, seeking gains where he can find them. Cane in hand, he left an interview to head to the White House, where Mr. Obama signed legislation extending health insurance for seven million children and making an additional four million eligible.

"Eleven million," Mr. Dingell said with a smile. "It's a nice round number, isn't it?"

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