P.S. to the NEWS
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ENFORCING PARTY DISCIPLINE

The paranoia of the party politicians about single-issue groups erupted into print recently when Representative Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr., the Speaker of the House, sent a disciplinary letter to 44 Democratic members. It wasn't a note designed to win friends and influence people; it was aimed at compelling obedience by strong-arm rule.

The scenario started out simple enough. Representative John Ashbrook (R-Ohio) offered an amendment to block any Internal Revenue regulation that could cause religious or private schools to lose their tax exemption.

The House parliamentarian ruled Ashbrook's amendment out of order. Ashbrook appealed the ruling of the chair and lost 214 to 182.

But Speaker O'Neill wasn't happy with the vote that sustained his ruling. He was upset because 44 Democrats broke ranks and joined with the Republicans on their losing motion to overrule the chair.

So Speaker O'Neill's disciplinary note to each of the upstart 44 read: "I was extremely disappointed to note that you voted against a motion to uphold the ruling of the chair last week. It is elementary to our procedural control of the House that the chair be supported by members of our party. That is basic to a parliamentary body. In other countries, if such a vote were lost, the government would fall."

"You should know," O'Neill continued, "that from 1937 to 1968 there were no recorded votes on the chair's rulings. From 1968 until 1979, there were four votes. Now we have seen three roll-call votes in seven weeks."

So much for historical background. Then came the mailed fist in the velvet glove. "Members of the Steering and Policy Committee and the whip's organization have discussed these developments, some of them calling for disciplinary measures and meetings. I believe, however, that our best course is to call the above facts to the members' attention."

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Then O'Neill identified the cause of such deviation from Democratic discipline. "I fully understand," he said, "the pressures that are brought to bear by single-issue groups on such occasions, but I believe members have to be ready to support the orderly process when a member seeks to confuse procedure with issue."

Finally came the stern reminder from Big Papa. "I trust you will take all these facts into consideration in the future. We must act together to enact a legislative program." In other words, shape up, buddy, and don't ever vote to overrule the chair.

Note O'Neill's allegation that it was the 44 Democrats whose vote against the chair's ruling was what "confused procedure with issue," rather than the chair's act in ruling Ashbrook's amendment out of order. The normally easy-going Mr. O'Neill was showing his bias.

The unusual number of roll-calls votes this year on attempts to overrule the chair is not just a matter of confusing issue with procedure. Those votes show that single-issue groups are alert and smart enough that they will not let the politicians confuse the issue and evade responsibility by hiding behind procedural maneuvers.

The issue of the Internal Revenue attempt to dictate terms and quotas to religious schools is a very hot issue at the grassroots. It has probably stimulated more mail to Capitol Hill than any issue in recent years.

The volume and the intensity of the letters have no doubt impressed upon the Congressmen the notion that the letter writers will consider a vote to <u>avoid</u> a vote on this issue as equivalent to a vote against the taxpayers. Indeed, they do not intend to let procedure confuse the issue.

Time was when whip-cracking by the Speaker would produce obedience and party loyalty. That day is probably past, and all it will do is to produce resentment among Congressmen and voters alike.

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