

## The Caucus

The Politics and Government Blog of The Times

NOVEMBER 10, 2009, 5:35 PM

### Senators Back Panel on Deficit Reduction

By JACKIE CALMES

The Senate budget committee chairman said a group of lawmakers would agree soon to a proposal for a bipartisan commission to force reductions in federal deficits, hoping to attach it either to must-pass legislation raising the nation's debt limit or, failing that, to the pending health care bill.

Senator Kent Conrad, Democrat of North Dakota, spoke after a committee hearing where all the invited witnesses — members of Congress and outside budget analysts — were, like him, supporters of some commission. Nearly all said they were “reluctant converts,” as two put it, having concluded that Democrats and Republicans cannot reach the needed compromises on spending cuts and tax increases without some forcing mechanism.

Mr. Conrad said he and Senator Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, the senior Republican on the budget committee, have agreed on legislation for a task force of lawmakers and administration officials that would report recommendations by the end of 2010 — after next November's elections. It would require Congress to vote quickly on the package, without amendments, during a lame-duck session.

“I will not vote for raising the debt limit without a vehicle to handle this.”

— Senator Dianne Feinstein

Other lawmakers have similar proposals. But Senator Dianne Feinstein, Democrat of California, and Senator John Cornyn, Republican of Texas, have proposed not a one-time panel but a permanent 15-member commission made up of mostly outside experts and only a few lawmakers; they would periodically propose ways to balance the benefits and revenues of Medicare and Social Security for Congress to vote on.

Last Friday, Mr. Conrad and other senators met with Senator Harry Reid, the Democratic majority leader from Nevada. “No decisions have been made,” Reid's spokesman, Jim Manley, said, and any decision would be reached with the House and Obama administration officials.

The idea has split the House Democratic leadership. Many House Democrats, led by Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, are opposed. But the House majority leader, Representative Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, issued a statement on Tuesday reiterating his support. A faction of fiscally conservative Democrats known as Blue Dogs also favors a fiscal commission.

President Obama and administration officials have met with proponents, including Mr. Conrad and Senator Evan Bayh, Democrat of Indiana, but have not committed to a budget commission given the difficulty of defining its membership.

“I think he's open-minded,” Mr. Bayh said of the president.

Mr. Obama's budget director, Peter R. Orszag, declined to comment.

(OVER)

Democrats are skeptical that Congressional Republicans would be constructive participants given their united opposition to the Obama agenda and more generally to tax increases. Republicans, in turn, doubt Democrats would be serious about reducing spending.

"More thought needs to go into its structure," said Senator Mark Warner, a Democrat of Virginia and a member of the budget committee. "I'm very concerned" that the most partisan members would be named, he said.

Mr. Warner nonetheless was among 10 Senate Democrats who recently sent a letter to Mr. Reid suggesting that their support for raising the debt limit would hinge on the leader allowing a vote on a special budget process.

"I will not vote for raising the debt limit without a vehicle to handle this," Ms. Feinstein said.

With the federal debt approaching the current \$12 trillion limit, Congress must raise it before the end of the year or the Treasury will be unable to borrow to finance government operations. For years, lawmakers have used the critical vote to press amendments on other issues.

Mr. Gregg said Republicans will also offer other amendments. One would freeze spending other than for the entitlement programs like Medicare, though it is entitlement spending that is driving the unsustainable growth of deficits. Two others would propose to rescind economic stimulus money and to dedicate financial institutions' bailout repayments to deficit reduction.

Mr. Conrad suggested there would be ways to pass a debt limit increase without amendments. But if that happened, he said, he would seek to add a commission amendment to the health care bill.