



For immediate release: February 4, 2016

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Members of the Bipartisan Working Group Discuss Effort to Find Common Ground on Capitol Hill

WASHINGTON, DC – With the presidential primaries upon us and political rhetoric heating up on the campaign trail, The Ripon Society and Franklin Center for Global Policy Exchange held a breakfast discussion yesterday morning to shine a light on a rare occurrence in Washington these days – bipartisanship.

The discussion featured five members of the Bipartisan Working Group (BPWG), which is an increasingly effective network of over 20 Republicans and Democrats who meet for one hour each week on Capitol Hill to not only talk about some of the challenges facing the American people, but some of the areas where both parties might be able to reach agreement and find common ground.

The BPWG Members attending yesterday’s breakfast included Democratic Reps. Scott Peters (CA-52), Derek Kilmer (WA-6), and John Carney (DE-AL), and Republican Reps. Larry Bucshon (IN-8) and Jim Renacci (OH-16). Renacci, who co-founded the BPWG with Carney shortly after both took office in 2011, kicked off the discussion by talking about the group’s origins and why it remains both relevant and needed today.

“It all started because John and I both agreed early on, almost a month or two after getting to Washington, that ideas and issues really can’t be solved by one person, and really can’t be solved by one party,” the Ohio lawmaker stated. “The problems we face are not Republican or Democrat problems – they’re American problems. And you really have to be able to work together to solve those things.” Carney agreed.

“This is the best hour of my week,” he said. “It enables me to do, frankly, what my people in Delaware expect me to do – which is to get things done... We’ve done some small ball things. But now each week when we get together, we really talk about the big issues -- which we didn’t do much of at the beginning. There’s a comfort level. And if you’re in the minority like we are and want to get something done, you better have a group like this where you have people in the majority who know what’s going on.”

Bucshon echoed his colleagues’ comments about the importance of the BPWG, and explained why he believed it was time well spent.



“We try to find areas where we can agree and find common ground,” he stated. “And we’ve had that happen. John and I pushed legislation related to drug shortages a few Congresses ago. We’ve pushed legislation regarding veterans. And we’ve worked on other things that have gotten signed into law. I think it’s an important hour every week.”

Kilmer said the group reflects the results-oriented attitude of the people he represents back home.

“I represent a District where people quite frankly don’t give a rip about whether we get more Democratic or more Republican, or more to the left or more to the right. They just want us to stop moving backwards and start moving forward. A group like this is one that engenders that sort of effort. I don’t want to mislead you into thinking that we spend an hour holding hands or singing Kumbaya. We don’t close our eyes and do trust falls into each other’s arms.”

All kidding aside, Kilmer also pointed to a number of areas where the group was able to find agreement and reach common ground. One of those areas was election reform, which, Kilmer said, was sparked by a meeting the BPWG had with Trevor Potter, the former Chairman of the Federal Election

Commission. “Coming out of that discussion with Trevor,” he said, “we actually introduced what is the first bipartisan election reform bill since McCain-Feingold a little more than a decade ago. Those are the kind of things that happen when you talk about tough issues.” Peters concurred.

“There are so many things that are important to people that we agree on and might have the prospect of moving forward on,” the California lawmaker said. “I was able to find a Republican cosponsor in Jim Renacci for a bill I’m working on for community resiliency in the face of severe weather, so we don’t have to spend

billions of dollars off-budget to deal with natural disasters. That’s the kind of thing we should be able to find agreement on and move forward on. But Congress is really stuck right now. If it’s going to move ahead, it’s going to be because there is a group like this where you find that you do have things in common and you can develop some trust. Even in the context of elections, people will say honest and complimentary things about each other in a way that, I think, is really constructive for the body.”

Renacci concluded by pointing to other pieces of legislation where the BPWG has found agreement. One such bill was The Information Reporting Simplification Act of 2015, which was cosponsored by Carney, supported by other members of the Bipartisan Working Group, and signed into law as part of the omnibus late last year. “At one point in time,” he added, “we had over 15 pieces of legislation that came out of our group that were passed by the House, four or five of which actually became law.”

After their remarks, the group was asked about the prospect for bipartisan agreement in any major areas this year.

“If the five of us got together,” Renacci stated, “we could get some big bipartisan things done. So there’s an answer there, but it’s hidden in the sense that it’s really the body that’s going to get it done in many ways, and it’s the parties that aren’t.”

Bucshon echoed Renacci’s comments, and pointed to one issue in particular where he thought bipartisan agreement could be reached.

“On taxes, we have a potential opportunity,” he said, “Especially with the multinational type of taxation, companies are affected by that. We’re seeing more and more inversions, where American companies -- publicly held companies -- are acting in the best fiduciary interests of their owners, which is the public. But the



laws are set in a way that they're, I don't want to say forced, but they're encouraged to do things that I think we can change, that will be beneficial to the American people, that will continue to create jobs in America, and will make American companies more wealthy. So I think there's a big opportunity there -- potentially this year." Carney agreed.

"International tax reform ought to be right up at the top of the list. It would start a cascade of tax reform on the corporate side here in the U.S. People don't realize that going into last fall there was a proposal in the Senate, the President had a proposal, there was a proposal in the Camp bill in the House to do some sort of repatriation, which would lead to international tax reform. The imperative for it is staggering. To think about inversions, to think about the loss of revenue base. I would say two-thirds of our colleagues don't even understand what's happening, but it's something that we ought to get done. The administration on repatriation was at 14%, the proposal in the Senate was at 9%, and Camp's proposal was 8%. In Delaware, we would have reached agreement on that in 10 minutes! We ought to get it done. Whether it can get done depends on the leadership on both sides." Kilmer struck an upbeat, but realistic, tone.

"I'm a genetic optimist," the lawmaker stated. "I came out of the state senate in Washington State where the last three bills I got to vote on were a budget, a debt reduction proposal -- a constitutional amendment to reduce the state debt, and a jobs bill -- a big \$2 billion infrastructure bill. Out of the 49 members of the Washington State legislature, the budget passed with two no votes, the debt reduction proposal lost seven liberal Democrats, and the jobs bill lost one tea party Republican. But other than that everyone voted for all of it because we worked on it together, we wrote it together, and we passed it together. I think there are some systemic challenges in doing some of the big stuff here; in part, because it's hard. Congress hasn't always demonstrated the ability to do easy things, let alone hard things. It's made more difficult by a legislative calendar where we have less than 100 legislative days between now and year's end. So there are some impediments to getting things done, but again, I have a sense of urgency, not just around tax reform but around a number of things I think ought to get done, and I certainly hope that we can." Peters concurred.



"I share the same sense of urgency," he stated. "I do think that Congress can move by leadership or by crisis, and I do think that the international tax situation we're in might provide enough reason for us to do something in reaction to what we've seen this year, which is very worrisome for American competitiveness in business. I do think there's also some chance of criminal justice reform that might be on the table. But I think a lot of big stuff is going to wait until after the Presidential election."