

**Beckelman & Harley
Discuss Efforts of House
Modernization Committee**

WASHINGTON, DC — On Wednesday, The Ripon Society and Franklin Center for Global Policy Exchange held a luncheon discussion with Yuri Beckelman and Derek Harley, the two Staff Directors leading The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

The Select Committee was created in January of 2019 and has the herculean task of finding a way to make Congress more effective, efficient, and transparent. Beckelman kicked off the event by discussing the core mission of the panel.

“People often ask what the power of the committee is,” Beckelman began, “and the power of this committee is consensus. We bring people together, we bring in experts, we turn those experts’ ideas into recommendations, and then we work with everyone to try to implement it. We don’t pass things or implement things through sheer force of will.”

Beckelman, who is a veteran of Capitol Hill with more than 15 years of policy and management experience, has organized numerous workshops and programs for congressional staffers to build new skills and better serve constituents. He was tapped to serve as the Select Committee’s Democratic Staff Director in February of this year.

“It’s not just about identifying the problems and coming up with solutions. It’s identifying why they’re a problem, how did we get here, and how do we figure out the proper solution to get out of it. That’s something we skip over a lot in Congress – we either try to come up with a solution quickly that doesn’t necessarily answer everything, or sometimes we even create solutions for problems that don’t exist. That’s way too common, and our committee doesn’t do that.”

Harley began serving as the Republican Staff Director in April. He began his career on Capitol Hill in 1999, eventually serving as a Chief of Staff for two members of Congress—most recently Brad Wenstrup (OH-2). He pointed to the Select Committee’s commitment to bipartisanship as one of its greatest strengths.

“I do believe that, at the end of the day, Republicans and Democrats share the same goals. Everyone wants a strong country, a prosperous country, and a better future



Derek Harley (left) & Yuri Beckelman (right)

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for our kids and grandkids. We just have different thoughts about how to get there, right?”

“Yuri and I, as bipartisan staff directors, we debate small things like management decisions and big things like policy decisions. We don’t always agree, but we find ways and we trust each other... I think that the American people are hungry for this kind of thing. I don’t mean the Select Committee per se, but the fact that there’s a group of members on our committee – six Republicans and six Democrats – all of whom agreed to do this because it’s important to them, because the institution is important to them. And the fact that there are members that are

working on that problem and trying to make it better gets people really fired up.”

The two then took a number of questions from the audience, including how the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way work is done on Capitol Hill and if it has been changed for the better.

“In the last year-and-a-half, we have upgraded technology on the Hill,” Beckelman stated. The Modernization Committee is doing great work by making recommendations, but it’s a real team effort and it’s a really exciting place to be in between the Chief Administrative Office and the Architect of the Capitol upgrading technology. You used to not be able to access your email or your shared files in a meaningful way on the go. You really weren’t doing any work. It was just people on their phone pretending like they were doing the work. That’s not the case anymore.

“Six years ago, I wrote one of the first telecommuting policies to ever exist on the Hill. It was one day a month during recess that you could telecommute in, and it was

seen as the most generous benefit you could find on the Hill — something laughable at this point after the last year-and-a-half... So, what do we hold onto post-pandemic? There are going to be telecommuting policies. That is a reality of the Hill now, and it will lead to less burnout, a higher level of retention, more job satisfaction, and more effectiveness.”

Harley agreed with his counterpart, explaining that 2020 proved to be a year of innovation and useful experimentation.

“Emergencies like the pandemic force you to focus the mind,” Harley stated, “and things happen that you might not expect, or they happen more quickly than they otherwise would.”

“I like to do things in person, so I’m excited to see us back and doing our meetings in person. But using Zoom, and other applications, is an additional tool that you have to meet with people that sometimes you otherwise wouldn’t... Frankly, the workplace has changed.”

Finally, Beckelman and Harley were asked whether they are looking to the state legislatures in the fifty states to better understand what makes any given legislative body more effective and civil. Beckelman answered first.

“The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and a few others participated a lot in the last Congress,”

Beckelman said. “We’re going to be doing field to try to understand their practices. You frequently hear Chairman

Kilmer regularly talk about his experience in the Washington State Legislature, so this really does inform a lot of the work that we do.”

Harley followed.

“For both of our bosses, Representatives Kilmer and Timmons, their experiences here are really colored by their experience in the state legislature. If you think about it, it is the way it should be. The states are the laboratories of democracy, right? So, we should be looking to them for our ideas, perspectives on policy, and particularly the way they run their legislature.”

Founded in 1978, The Franklin Center for Global Policy Exchange is a non-partisan, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization committed to enhancing global understanding of important international issues. The Franklin Center brings together Members of the U.S. Congress and their international parliamentary counterparts as well as experts from the Diplomatic corps, foreign officials, senior private sector representatives, scholars, and other public policy experts. Through regular conferences and events where leading international opinion leaders share ideas, the Franklin Center promotes enlightened, balanced, and unbiased international policy discussion on major international issues.

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