

Interview with Rep. Joseph P. Addabbo (D-NY)

April 1964

“You’ve got four agricultural [subcommittee] members and myself. You’ve got a cross section—corn, cotton, tobacco, wheat, and the marijuana farmer from New York.”

Regarding the relationship between Appropriations Committee Chairman Clarence Cannon (D-MO) and the five new members in the 88th Congress (Robert N. Giaimo of CT, Julia Butler Hansen of WA, Edward R. Finnegan of IL, Charles S. Joelson of NJ, and Addabbo): “The newspapers played it up that we were the big spenders and we were going to take over the Committee. He [Cannon] doesn’t have to worry. He can bottle you up if he wants to. He can create subcommittees or change the membership. He can have a three-man subcommittee if he wants to – two and one. Or he can put another conservative on the Committee and box you in that way. But he hasn’t. Actually, he’s given us more say. The subcommittees used to be seven men. Now they are only five. So we have more influence than the fellows before us. There are five of us and maybe we could pick up five more and say, ‘I’ve got a bloc of ten votes, and we’ll go along with you if you will do this.’ We could demagogue that way and cause a lot of trouble, but we don’t. There’s a job to be done, and you do it. After you’ve been here a while you realize the obligation you have to the Committee and to your people back home and to your fellow representatives. They are busy with their committees and they lean on you. They come and they ask you what you think, ‘are they spending too much or too little?’ So you have to do your job.”

Regarding the other members’ attitudes about the Committee: “They think we’re too conservative. At least the liberal ones do.”

He was an inner circle choice. He kept speaking of his appointment as being “good for the New York delegation.” He stressed the fact that the delegation wanted to keep the seat. In terms of the appeal of the Committee he stressed the scope of the Committee’s work and its influence.

Regarding his appointment: “The Chairman was peeved because he wasn’t consulted and he wasn’t consulted because of the trouble with the leadership at the end of the last session [1962]. He didn’t have anything against us, per se. We were caught in a squeeze play between the leadership and the old man.”

It is interesting to note that the scope of the Appropriations Committee is one of the main attractions of the Committee, and that this is why so many of the young people find the Committee structure so disappointing to them. What they find is that although they know the Committee covers the full range of governmental activities, they play a role only in subcommittees. The full Committee should be the place where they take advantage of the scope of Committee activity – and it is precisely the full Committee where they play so small a part. Hence their first acquaintance with the full Committee is a great blow to them. “We didn’t know the function of things. You walk in there and they say, ‘here’s a report, here’s the bill and that’s it...but you are really not shut off—you can read the

hearings and most everything is there. Of course, you don't have the time or may not take the time. And it would be easier if you could get the report a day earlier. You could pick up things you might be against. But you can read the hearings, and you can talk with other subcommittee members if you want to. If you can't do things the easy way, you do them the hard way. And you can always get up on the floor and say what you think. You have time there to get prepared. It would be better the other way, but it's not going to change. They've been doing it for tens of years and no one has proven he's been hurt by it. The subcommittees are the ones who work on the bill. I see it on our subcommittee. We are the ones who sit there all the time and we know more about it than anyone else. So it's right that they should have most of the say."

Regarding floor opposition to the Committee: "I've done it—two times last year and this year, too. They'll ask you why and you give your reasons. But you don't get anywhere."

He specializes only in "consumer interests" on the Agriculture subcommittee.

Regarding markup, he says it is "pretty well wrangled out and put through the wringer there." No change results in full Committee. There is a lot of talk informally after each of the hearings, and he says that you get a pretty good idea of what the thinking of the Committee is. Therefore, the subcommittee chairman's figures aren't a surprise completely, even though he takes the lead working with the staff man. The point is that the subcommittee chairman knows something of the thinking of the members from informal interchanges all during the hearings.

If I wanted to demagogue about it, I could defeat the whole farm bill. The city boys would take my word for it. There isn't any farm bloc any more and they need our support. But you don't do that. It was a great revelation to me about the farm economy and the connection with the city."

He gets more conservative the longer he is on the Committee—though not as strongly as some. "All you see are these money bills, and you look at them to see where you can save the taxpayers some money. There's a lot of taxpayers' dollars in that bill."

He points out that "my voting record was the most erratic of the New York City Democrats" and said that most of the new people were erratic voters, too, except for Joelson.

He's less backward than Rep. Alfred E. Santangelo (D-NY)—he stresses his education on agriculture and his lack of background is the same as Santangelo. But he seems to speak up more in the subcommittee and be something less of an apprentice. Maybe it's because the farm bloc is smaller and his influence is greater.

His subcommittee assignment was not his choice, but he was resigned. "It isn't going to change very soon. So you do your job and wait to see the way the cookie crumbles." He thinks his assignment was better anyway than some others.

The hearings are the most important to him. He mentioned how much he learned there. Especially since he had no background. The function of the hearings for the newcomer is informational.

When I told him I started in 1959, he said, “it hasn’t changed much.”

“Fortunately or unfortunately, I was elected to the Committee.”

He cited the change in living habits—culture shock. The problem of the Tuesday–Thursday Club member. “It’s an especially hard committee for a New York City member. It’s a Monday through Friday job. Hearings are held every day and you have to be here a lot more than you do on any legislative committee. So I’m down here more than I ever was before. It’s quite a change for me.”