

Interview with Rep. Clarence Cannon (D-MO)

June 10, 1959

General remarks: Cordial and talkative—a great sense for the office he holds and for the tradition he carries on—says he doesn't care if I quote—very sharp—answered each question by going back historically, but always came back to the precise point I was getting at.

Re. Conference Committee: “We've got to have it. It's the only way we can get together”—Then a long discussion on the two great mistakes, changing lame-duck congress and the popular election of Senators—“Under the old system, everyone knew we were going home on March 4th. The country knew it; we knew it. We accomplished in five months what we [now] accomplish in nine... Now, nobody knows when we are going home... The Senators are interested in chicken-feed politics. They go back to their states and go around to every little town to see where they can use some money. And they say, ‘The House won't take care of you, but the Senate will. We want to give you some money.’ They play petty politics like they were running for dogcatcher. They didn't use to do that—they were above it. We bring ‘em over a good bill, but every time they raise it... We go over there, and I say, ‘This item is not authorized. The Corps of Engineers hasn't agreed. It's ridiculous, and I'm not going to vote for it.’ And they say, ‘Oh, that's Senator so-and-so's project; Oh, that's Senator such-and-such's project. We can't touch that.’ They have a system over there where any Senator can get anything in a bill he wants—a gentleman's agreement. So we sit there; and then Sam Rayburn [House Speaker, D-TX] calls and says, ‘Clarence, let's get the hell out of here. Everybody wants to go home. Let's get away from here.’ It's a holdup. (He put his hands in a gesture of futility.) It's like someone sticking a gun at your head and saying ‘Stand and deliver.’”

“Time was when John Taber [R-NY, ranking member on Appropriations] and I could sit here right at this table and go over the whole schedule—authorizations and all. If we saw something that ought to come out, we'd take it out; and if we saw something that ought to go in, we'd put it in.” Then he went on to discuss the pork-barrel session of a few years ago on Public Works—“They ran over John Taber and I and took the committee with them like a bunch of steers.”

Appropriations, he said (and this was first point he made) “is the Achilles' heel of our system of government. We've got the greatest system of government in the history of the world, with free speech etc...but appropriations are made by congressmen who need to get elected. And in order to get elected they want to appropriate money.” Congressmen need to get reelected and therefore they need projects. “Every member of the Congress has a friend on the Appropriations Committee and they say, ‘Jim wants this project; let's help him out.’ Or ‘Jim needs to be elected, let's help him out.’” He wants some intermediate body, a neutral non-elective body or something. I wonder if he would seriously advocate such a change or whether he wasn't feeling rather acutely some of the shortcomings of the system at the time of the interview

Re. he and Taber in attendance at markup; he instituted the idea of the minority man going to all markup sessions—prior to that, just the Chairman went.

I asked him if he and Taber were usually on the same side. “Usually. We’re both on the conservative side, interested in saving money. There aren’t many conservatives left—more and more people are interested in spending money.”

The biggest job of the Committee is to watch the taxpayers’ dollar.

He calls the Appropriations Committee a “business committee” and not a policy —went into a lengthy detailing of its separation from the Ways and Means Committee, the Budget and Accounting Act of 1920. He spoke of the separation of appropriations from policy functions and how points of order keep them separate today. “Thaddeus Stevens was Chairman of Ways and Means. But he chose to become Chairman of Appropriations, and was the first Chairman of Appropriations.” They used to call Stevens, in the novels of Thomas Dixon, “the stone man.”

He says there are no minority reports because there is no policy involved, and because these things have been thrashed out, “ad lib, in extenso, and ad nauseam in the legislative committees.”— “The only problem is whether to appropriate 20 million or 15 million or nothing” (not policy). Well, he knows it is, and he says that the Appropriations Committee will “put in a little legislation here and there to protect the money.” He said this in passing and not approvingly.

Re. the unity of the Committee: He told his Committee before they took the public works bill out on the floor that the armed services “hate each other worse than they hate Russia,” and yet they all come up here and say the same thing. “I told them we should have a united front. If there are any objections or charges, we ought to hear it now, and not wash our dirty linen out on the floor. If we don’t have a bill that we can all agree on and support, we ought not to report it out. To do that is like throwing a piece of meat to a bunch of hungry animals. And on the whole, we do... But with increasing frequency we are getting jumped on the floor.” And he went into the water lilies.

Re. water lilies: “We sat for five months and heard hundreds of witnesses, and not once was that water lilies [project] mentioned until someone in full Committee, jumped up and made a motion. That’s no way to do it. The purpose of subcommittees is to hear testimony, get the facts, to let everybody have a chance to tell his story, and come to a deliberate and considered judgment.” He was very disapproving of this technique.

Re. men getting on the Committee: They serve, “a few years before the mast—a period of probation” before they get on—“They are very carefully screened.” “If they are good men, they are taken off the other committees and put on the Appropriations Committee.”

Re. subcommittee selection: Usually, they get what they request—what they are interested in—But then he pointed to Chairman Joe Cannon’s (1836-1926) picture on the wall, “When that man was Chairman, if a man had a shipyard in his district or a naval

base, he put him on the Interior subcommittee, or if he had interior projects in his district, he'd put him on naval affairs (he said this with a twinkle in his eye)... Sometimes we have to follow that practice. No member of the Committee should be obligated by his supporters to a certain appropriation. He should be able to take a judicial view of appropriations—a neutral view.”

“There are more lobbyists in Washington than there are Congressmen, and they make more money than Congressmen.” He spoke of the private-power people masquerading as wild-life conservationists.

He spoke of the anti-deficiency bill, and how they tried for a long time to get one that would stick—eight or nine years—“These people in the executive departments think that ‘those Congressmen up there are a nuisance—we don’t have to go through them. We’ll just spend the money and go up and ask them for more.’ And we’d have to dip down and appropriate the money... We have them more in line now.” They have cut down on the end of the year spending, too.

Re. conference committee—At the time of the Constitutional Convention, they were going to have only the House spend money. But then they decided that the House would be too willing to spend money, and they needed somebody to hold them down. They thought the Senate would keep the House from spending too much—“If ever there was a bad prediction, it was that one.”

He spoke with great feeling about the desirability of contact with the people—Congressmen ought to go home a lot to see what people are thinking etc.—“very important,” he kept saying.