

June 23, 2008

WANT TO JOIN THE SENATE DEBATE ON ENERGY? HERE'S YOUR CHANCE

I was deep in thought on my back porch at Big Canoe in the North Georgia mountains when the phone rang. It was Sen. Saxby Chambliss calling from Washington. He sounded as if he had been rode hard and put away wet. Given his druthers, I suspect he would have preferred sitting on the porch staring at the mountains than stuck in Washington with a group of people sporting a 13 percent approval rating. I'm talking about Congress, of course.

What had the senator in a snit was another fruitless day of debating a national energy policy with Democrats in the Senate. "I just can't figure out what the Democrats are trying to do," he said. I'm sure he wasn't calling me for an answer because I would have told him that the Democrats are playing election-year politics with our pocketbooks just like the Republicans are wont to do. Maybe that is why Congress has a 13 percent approval rating.

But I will give our senior senator his due. He seemed genuinely upset over the lack of progress in Congress regarding the energy crisis and told me he would like to hear from you about how rising gas prices have impacted you and your family. (You can write him at Saxby_Chambliss@chambliss.senate.gov, or call him toll free at 1-800-234-4208.) He is reading constituent letters on the floor of the Senate, trying to get his colleagues to understand that as gas prices go up, so does the frustration level of the voters. If he reads your letter, maybe you will get your name in the Congressional Record. Given a choice, I suspect you would settle for some relief at the gas pump.

I can't recall an issue in recent memory that has angered and aggravated the American people more than the increase in fuel costs, which shows no signs of abating. Not only do the rising prices of energy affect our transportation costs, they seem to jack up the price of just about everything else as well. And nobody in Washington seems willing or able to do anything about it.

Chambliss says he is trying. He is co-author of a bill that would suspend the federal tax on gasoline and diesel fuel for the summer. That would save us 18.4 cents a gallon on gas and 24.4 cents per gallon on diesel fuel.

In addition, the senator is part of an effort to increase domestic oil and gas production, including proposals to make areas of the Outer Continental Shelf and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) more accessible to oil and gas exploration. "I heard Barack Obama say the other day that even if we started drilling in those areas today," Chambliss told me, "it would be six to eight years before we would see any results. I don't understand that comment. The more years we wait, the longer it will take. We have to start sometime."

In addition to opening up new areas for exploration, which would help ameliorate the supply problem, Sen. Chambliss says he is pushing for alternative fuels, such as cellulosic ethanol made from materials like straw and plant wastes to decrease our reliance on foreign oil. He says also that we have to conserve more as individuals. I agree. My suggestion would be that anybody going 15 miles over the speed limit be hung by their thumbs in a very public place. That would take care of half the driving population, a majority of yuppie-boomers and most of our fuel needs.

The American people are fed up with the political gamesmanship in Washington. We are tired of all talk and no action from Congress — both Democrats and Republicans. I hope you will take Sen. Chambliss up on his offer and let him know how you feel. Let's see if we can get Congress off the dime and focused on solving the energy crisis in this country. I suspect you will have his full attention. He is, after all, running for re-election.

In the meantime, I will get back to hibernating on the back porch of my tree house at lovely Big Canoe. That takes no energy at all.