Last week President Clinton moved us another step forward in our continuing effort to improve our Nation's child support enforcement system. I want to commend him on taking such a bold step in issuing an Executive order which will improve and expedite child support enforcement for Federal employees.

The Executive order will cross-match the names of Federal employees with Federal employment records and inform the States if there is a match. A determination will be made by the State as to whether wage withholding or other actions are necessary. The order will simplify service of process for Federal employees.

In addition, it will require every Federal agency to cooperate with the Federal parent locator service. The Executive order also cuts the time in half between the day a paycheck is garnished and the day it is received by the custodial parent.

Now, almost every Member of this body knows and my constituents know that I am a strong supporter of Federal employees and fight for their pay and benefits. But they, like others, need to be responsible. And they need to support their children.

The President has established a working model upon which the Congress can build. In the next couple of weeks I hope this House will bring a bill to the floor which contains meaningful reform to the current system.

The previous speaker talked about welfare reform and a couple of others did as well. There is not a person in this body that does not know that welfare is broke. And the issue is, how do we fix it? How do we fix it, and, yes, expect and demand work, but also understand that to get to work, we are going to have to take actions to facilitate that transfer from dependency to independence.

Before we reach the floor for the final vote, there is still ground which can be covered such as revocation of driver's licenses for persons owing child support arrearages. While I applaud my colleagues for including child support in their welfare reform package, I am disappointed that they chose to not include this provision. The inclusion of such a provision would have the effect of again holding parents responsible for support of their children.

The State of Maine has instituted such a plan. Since implementation, the State has revoked less than 20 licenses, but because of the threat of license revocation, the State has received about 12 million additional dollars for back child support.

Just imagine how much could be collected and used to support our Nation's children if this were implemented in all 50 states.

Mr. Speaker, we all agree the child support system is in need of reform. Let us take actions in the coming weeks to make sure that children receive the support from their parents that they are due morally and legally.

PUNITIVE DAMAGES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Tennessee [Mr. BRYANT] is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BRYANT of Tennessee. Mr. Speaker, punitive damages have clearly gotten out of hand. Tonight, I want to share with you a case involving punitive damages in my home State of Tennessee.

Sadly, it involved the death of an individual from Alabama by carbon monoxide poisoning.

The plaintiff claimed that the carbon monoxide poisoning was caused by a natural gas water heater made in Tennessee. It was a used heater obtained by a homeowner and installed by someone with no plumbing background. It was installed behind a wall without combustion air, with no vent, and was connected to an LP gas line. The local gas company wasn't notified, and that was a violation of local law.

In short, the heater was altered from its original manufactured condition and was installed improperly and illegally. Nevertheless, a jury verdict was rendered against State industries. The jury awarded $5.5 million in compensatory damages and $6.5 in punitive damages. In fact, one of the jurors wanted to give $25 million.

On appeal, the Alabama Supreme Court reduced the compensatory damages to $850,000, but the punitive damages stood.

Now I am not criticizing in any way, shape, or form the person who installed the heater. In his mind's eye, he was lending a helping hand. And I am truly sorry for the death of anyone. But what I am criticizing is the award the jury made.

Punitive damages are intended to punish—not to redistribute wealth. Compensatory damages are designed to compensate for medical costs, lost wages, pain and suffering, and emotional distress. Punitive damages are intended to punish—to send a message that whatever was done wrong, don't do it again.

Had the legislation before us tonight been in place, the plaintiff still could have received almost $3.5 million. That's a substantial amount of money which would have served to both compensate the plaintiff for their suffering and punish the defendant for whatever wrong they may have done.

This legislation will not impede upon anyone's right to sue, despite the many fallacious and misleading charges by its opponents.

I would support no legislation that would close the courthouse doors to anyone. Access to the courts is a fundamental right that must be acknowledged. But as a lawyer, I can tell you we must have tort reform, and we must have it now.

It's time we establish common sense and reason in our judicial system, and this legislation does just that. Many States have already placed caps on punitive damage awards.

It's time the Federal Government followed their lead, and passed tort reform legislation.

A CHALLENGE TO THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY: GIVE US YOUR SPENDING CUTS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. LONGLEY). Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Georgia [Mr. KINGSTON] is recognized for 5 minutes.

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Mr. KINGSTON. Mr. Speaker, the balanced budget amendment is not truly dead, but it is in the hospice care unit across the hall. In the House about 130 Democrats voted against it, 2 Republicans. In the Senate, 33 Democrats and 1 Republican voted against it, so apparently, I know the Democrats had some heartburn with the concept of a balanced budget amendment.

One of the big reasons that they gave, particularly in the Senate, was monkeying with the Constitution. Apparently, not monkeying with the Constitution is more important than not letting the country go bankrupt. Obviously, interpretation of the Constitution and its sacredness is relative to proximity to reelection.

I would say that so many times, if you watch the Senators speaking, they flip-flop back and forth more than an old Patsy Cline record on the jukebox.

First, they said, the Constitution: ''I'm not going to vote for a balanced budget amendment because of the Constitution.'' Then, they said ''Give us your specifics, Republicans. You want to balance the budget by the year 2002, give us the specifics.''

Last week, the Committee on Appropriations gave $17 billion in specific cuts, very difficult cuts, heart-wrenching in many cases, painful, many times politically risky, politically unwise. Members had programs in their own districts that were reduced, at a time when there is a lot of screaming and crying back home to keep these programs.

What the Republican Party has had to do is say ''Look, we are on a sinking boat. We are asking everybody to throw out a little bit of your own luggage, but we think if you do that, we can get the boat ashore. We can guarantee you if you won't let go of your luggage, we are going down.''

At a $4.5 trillion debt, and an item on our budget called interest on the national debt, which is the third largest expenditure in the national budget, $20 billion a month, we are going bankrupt.

Yet, Mr. Chairman, we hear time and time again, as we did earlier tonight from the gentleman from Missouri, ''We are not doing things for the children.'' Back home, Mr. Speaker, it reminds me of when I was a kid. My daddy had a charge account at a pharmacy.