

is a Democratic congressman from Maryland. Congressman, thanks very much for coming in.

VAN HOLLEN: It's good to be with you.

BLITZER: You happen to be my congressman as well since I live in your district. But that's not going to make this any easier for you.

VAN HOLLEN: Come on, Wolf.

BLITZER: No favorites. All right. Let's talk a little bit about what we just heard from John Boehner. Why not start drilling? There are enormous amounts of oil right here in the United States on the coast, on the East Coast, the West Coast and Alaska. That could dramatically increase supply and as a result reduce the price per barrel and the price at the pump. What is wrong with that?

VAN HOLLEN: Well, we are drilling. There is nothing wrong with drilling. We have lots of oil companies in the United States that are drilling.

BLITZER: Nancy Pelosi votes against even one of these drilling propositions.

VAN HOLLEN: And in fact, there are 60 million acres of federal land that are currently leased to the oil and gas companies that are sitting idle. They're not drilling. They like the status quo. They like the way things are going. We're going to have legislation that is going to be considered shortly that is use it or lose it. If you are going to hold up these 68 million of federal lands, you've got to start drilling for oil or else somebody else should have an opportunity to do it.

VAN HOLLEN: Because the fact of the matter is they've been idle for all these many years. So the point is there's lots of acreage out there already under lease . . .

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: Here is Congressman Roy Blunt, the number two Republican in the House, speaking out on this issue this week.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REP. ROY BLUNT, R-MO: Who's to blame are policies that wouldn't allow us to use our own resources. Every other country in the world looks at their natural resources and sees them as an economic asset. Democrats in Washington look at our natural resources and see them as an environmental hazard. That's a mistake.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: All right. What do you say?

VAN HOLLEN: Facts are stubborn things. Sixty-eight million acres of federal lands, currently leased to the oil and gas industry, sitting idle. We're going to say to them, "Use it or lose it. Get pumping."

The issue isn't whether or not we should use our natural resources. The issue is exactly where. And what you're saying is, when you've got 68 million acres of federal lands already leased, you should use that before you start looking elsewhere.

BLITZER: They say they can drill in Alaska in an environmental safe way. You just heard Congressman Boehner say that.

VAN HOLLEN: As John McCain said, there are already areas where they can drill. We shouldn't be drilling there.

And let me point out that the Department of Energy, our own department of Energy, has said, if you drill in Alaska, first of all, you won't see any results at the pump for 10 years. And after 20 years, you might see a reduction of two cents per gallon.

This is not a way to solve our energy problem. The problem is the oil—the Republican Party has been very tight with the oil and gas industry for many years. And all they're proposing is more of the same, more subsidies for the oil and gas industry. I think it's important to point out that, since George Bush was elected president, the oil and gas industry has contributed over \$94

million to the Republican Party and its candidates. So I'm not surprised . . .

BLITZER: How much have they contributed to the Republicans?

VAN HOLLEN: A whole lot less. I mean, we're talking about, maybe, 80 percent to Republicans, 20 percent to Democratic candidates, generally.

The DCCC—we don't take money from oil and gas PACs. And I think what you see, in the results, is the policy.

They're calling for more of the same. We should not be giving more subsidies to the oil and gas industry. Our proposal is to say, let's take those funds and invest them in renewable energy and energy efficiency.

BLITZER: The DCCC is the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which you're in charge of. You're the chairman and your job is to get more Democrats elected to the House of Representatives.

You say that you don't accept money from the oil and gas PACs. But you do accept money from lobbyists and other PACs, even though Barack Obama doesn't accept that money for his campaign. And he's now told the DNC not to accept that kind of money.

VAN HOLLEN: Well, we did something very new this time around. In fact, I led the effort in the House; Barack Obama led the effort in the Senate, to require transparency, for the first time, of bundling by lobbyists.

That means that, when registered lobbyists are raising money, not just their own contribution but they're going out and raising it from other people, that we're now going to disclose that.

So what we believe is you should have total transparency. People can make up their mind. But when we tried to do that under the Republican-controlled Congress, when we tried to get that transparency, they said no. So we've seen a dramatic change already.

BLITZER: But just to clear, unlike the DNC or the Obama campaign, you'll still take that PAC money, that lobbying money?

VAN HOLLEN: The DCCC is a multi-candidate committee, unlike the presidential campaign committee where one person gets to make a decision.

BLITZER: Listen to John McCain rail against Senator Obama on the issue of taxes. Because he says that, if Obama is elected president, taxes won't only go up for the wealthy, but they'll go up for the middle class as well. Listen to this.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP) MCCAIN: When Senator Obama talks about raising income tax rates on those making over \$250,000, that includes these businesses as well. He also proposes increases in dividends and capital gains taxes. Under Senator Obama's tax plan, Americans of every background would see their taxes rise.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: That's going to scare a lot of voters out there.

VAN HOLLEN: But it's flat-out untrue. And people need to go and look at what Barack Obama is proposing. What he has proposed is a middle-class tax cut. People in the middle income category will get a tax cut. If you're over \$250,000 a year, you may see your Bush tax breaks rolled back some.

So this is an issue where people have got to look at the facts. Because the Democrats have been pushing for AMT reform. We want to get rid of the alternative minimum tax. We want middle-class tax relief.

The Republicans, on the other hand, have focused on providing tax breaks to people at the very, very top.

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: A lot of middle-class families have investments where they get capital gains, where they get, you know, dividends. And he says, under Obama's proposals, they would be paying more tax.

VAN HOLLEN: Well, what Obama has said is that you shouldn't give a break to leisure over labor.

In other words, people who are making money simply by investing it, rather than through their work in the labor force, shouldn't be getting a break over the people who are going to work every day. That's essentially his position. And I think that makes sense to most people, that if you're working every day, you shouldn't carry a larger burden than other . . .

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: So you have no problem seeing the capital gains tax rate go up?

Because Obama has clearly suggested, if he had his way, it would go up.

VAN HOLLEN: Well, we're going to be looking at Senator Obama's proposal. We haven't adopted any particular position on that issue, in the House, as Democrats. But I just want to be clear that that's what he said.

I think what you're seeing here, Wolf, is a feeling in the country—we saw it in these polls—that the Republican leadership in Washington is in a bubble. They're very much out of touch with the economic pain Americans are feeling.

John McCain said, not long ago, that we have seen great progress under the Bush administration. And if you like George Bush's economic policies, you're going to love John McCain's economic policies.

What we've seen is unemployment has gone up. In fact, last month, we saw the largest increase . . .

(CROSSTALK)

VAN HOLLEN: But we proposed unemployment insurance compensation. John Boehner and the Republicans opposed that. When people are struggling with their mortgages, they were there to bail out Bear Stearns, but the fact of the matter is they voted against a housing stabilization plan.

So I think people see this disconnect between the Democrats, who are trying to connect with middle-class families, and Republicans, who are always looking out for the very folks at the top and the oil and gas industry.

BLITZER: Congressman Van Hollen, thanks for coming in.

VAN HOLLEN: Thanks for having me. BLITZER: Happy Fathers Day.

VAN HOLLEN: Thank you.

BLITZER: I appreciate it very much.

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington.

CFTC

Ms. CANTWELL. Mr. President, I rise for a few minutes this evening to talk about a couple events from today. First of all, the price of oil today hit over \$140 a barrel—another, I think, tragic milestone as it relates to the impact on our economy and the challenges we face as oil prices continue to go higher and higher and higher.

I also note for my colleagues that the House took very aggressive action today in basically ordering the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, on an overwhelming 402-19 vote, to take action to utilize its authority, including its emergency powers, which is critical for the CFTC to do if it wants to have proper oversight of these oil futures markets.

Now, I know this is something we have been pushing here in the Senate, saying there are loopholes we still need to close. Many of my colleagues joined in a letter last month—22 of us—to the CFTC telling them to use their authority and to act aggressively. They came back with a half step saying they were going to start collecting new information from the British regulators that oversee some of our oil markets in the U.S.

We told the CFTC that was not good enough. We told them to use their existing authority to start collecting information directly from the Intercontinental Exchange Futures Europe, a dark market that is subject to British oversight but operates in the United States under a CFTC staff no-action policy.

I think those pleas by us have basically gone ignored or at least half steps have been taken by the CFTC. So I was very pleased today that H.R. 6377 passed the House of Representatives 402 to 19. So there has been an outstanding margin of bipartisan support in the House of Representatives to pass a bill that requires the CFTC to use its existing authority, including emergency authority. This bill does not say the CFTC “may” utilize its authorities; it says they “shall.” So it is very direct. It says those broad emergency authorities that include investigating excessive speculation, reducing position limits—basically overall stricter position limits—and including limiting or suspending trading. These are things the CFTC has the power to do in its emergency authorities to make sure excessive speculation and manipulation are not occurring in the markets.

So I want to say I think this is a very bold step the House of Representatives has done. They did this very quickly today, and in a very aggressive, bipartisan fashion.

I hope the Senate would take the same aggressive measure as soon as possible, and in the same overwhelming majority, to show we are serious about reining in excessive speculation and potential manipulation in the oil markets.

I thank the Presiding Officer and yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Montana.

MEDICARE IMPROVEMENTS

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, on Tuesday, the House passed the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act, and I urge the Senate to take up and pass this bill tonight.

The House passed the bill with an overwhelming vote, 355 to 59. That is a 6-to-1 ratio. Even among Republican Members of the House, more than twice as many Republicans voted for the bill as against it.

The Senate should take up and pass this Medicare bill not just because the House passed it with 355 votes, but, rather, because it is the right thing to

do. The Senate should pass this Medicare bill because time is running out. I understand the House is going to adjourn today. I think they have cast their last vote. If we don't act soon, the law cuts payments to doctors by 10 percent on July 1. We have to stop that cut. That cut threatens access to care for America's seniors. Already, some providers are declining Medicare patients. That trend will accelerate—believe me, I have talked to a lot of doctors—that trend will accelerate if we don't act. We must pass this bill tonight. The Senate should pass this Medicare bill because it is the only way to avoid the cut. There is no other option. There is no alternative. There is no short-term solution. This is the only train in the station. This is it.

The House-passed bill is very similar to S. 3101. That is the Baucus-Snowe bill the Senate considered 2 weeks ago, but the House made three noteworthy changes to that bill.

First, the House-passed bill includes legislation to delay the Competitive Acquisition Program for durable medical equipment. Congressmen PETE STARK and DAVID CAMP introduced legislation to do that in the House, and Senator GRASSLEY and I, along with 24 other Senators, introduced that legislation here in the Senate.

I support competitive bidding as a way to decrease costs, but Congress needs to ensure that these savings are not achieved at the expense of beneficiary access to the care they need in their own communities. We need to take a closer look at competitive bidding before it moves forward. The passage of this Medicare bill will allow that.

The House-passed bill also does not include cuts in funding for oxygen supplies and equipment, and it does not include cuts in funding for power wheelchairs. Those who support these reforms make a good case, but ultimately the cuts could not be included as part of this must-pass legislation.

This bill is a balanced package. It is a true compromise. It does not go nearly as far as many House Democrats wanted it to go, and it goes about as far as some of my Republican colleagues in the Senate can go.

When the House passed its children's health bill last year, the House made major changes to the Medicare Advantage Program. Last year's House CHIP bill would have significantly restricted the program, but this House Medicare bill does not do that.

This bill includes a reduction in the double payment for medical education costs to private plans in Medicare, and this bill would protect seniors from unscrupulous marketing practices by private health plans. That has to be corrected and it is in this bill. Both of those changes were also included in a bill crafted by Senate Republicans. I think they are wise, and they are wise to follow up with a similar vote later on tonight.

This bill would do more. It would also require the so-called private fee-

for-service plans to form provider networks. All other plans must, all other Medicare Advantage plans must, and so should private fee-for-service plans. It would also make sure there are doctors behind those plans. It is not the case in current law, but that change is made in this bill. This bill does not—I must say—does not include deep cuts to Medicare Advantage payments. It also does not cut private fee-for-service plan payments at all. It just has this provision which I think is a major reform.

I would go further on Medicare Advantage, but I must say to my colleagues that this is not the time and this is not the legislation to do that. This is the time to avert the pending cut in payments to doctors. That payment cut would devastate access to care for America's seniors. We cannot let that happen. We cannot let those cuts go through, which would devastate care for America's seniors.

So what else will this bill do? For Medicare beneficiaries, this Medicare bill would expand access for preventive services. We have all talked about that, and this bill does it. It would eliminate the discriminatory copayment requirements for seniors with mental illnesses. We have talked about that. We should not have discriminatory copayment requirements for seniors with mental illness. And it provides additional needed care for low-income seniors.

The Medicare bill would take important steps to shore up our health care system in rural areas. It includes provisions from the Craig Thomas Rural Hospital and Provider Equity Act. We included that in this bill.

The bill includes important relief for ambulance providers, community health centers, and primary care physicians. They need some additional help. Primary care doctors represent the backbone of our health care system. This legislation, the House-passed bill and the Senate bill, does make those provisions.

This Medicare bill would make important improvements in pharmacy payments. It would make payments under the Part D drug benefit fairer and more timely, especially to those who dispense drugs to our Nation's senior citizens.

This bill would save valuable Medicare dollars by providing a single bundled payment for all the services related to treating end-stage renal disease. That is a reform. And for the first time, dialysis facilities would receive a permanent, market-based update to their payments each year, something they have been asking for and deserve. This would make sure Medicare payments keep up with their costs.

I wrote the legislation on which this Medicare bill was based to make sure the seniors in my home State of Montana and everywhere in our country can get quality, affordable health care. This Medicare bill would do right by low-income and rural seniors.