

With that, Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT—EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that at 5 p.m., on Monday, November 30, the Senate proceed to executive session to consider the following nomination: Calendar No. 268; that there be 30 minutes of debate equally divided in the usual form; that following the use or yielding back of time, the Senate vote on the nomination without intervening action or debate; that following disposition of the nomination, the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate; that no further motions be in order to the nomination; that any statements related to the nomination be printed in the RECORD; that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action and the Senate then resume legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Maine.

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I just want to make a brief announcement before yielding to Senator BLUNT and Senator KLOBUCHAR, and that is that we are open for business as far as amendments are concerned.

I would invite my colleagues to start sharing their proposals with Senator REED, with me, and with our staffs so we can see if there are some that can be cleared, and perhaps, later in the day, we can move by unanimous consent a package of those that are acceptable and noncontroversial to both sides. The sooner we can get going on the review of those amendments, the better. I would encourage my colleagues to proceed.

I thank the Chair, and I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Missouri is recognized.

EXPRESSING SUPPORT FOR THE GOALS OF NATIONAL ADOPTION DAY AND NATIONAL ADOPTION MONTH

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the consideration of S. Res. 315, submitted earlier today.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the resolution by title.

The bill clerk read as follows:

A resolution (S. Res. 315) expressing support for the goals of both National Adoption Day and National Adoption Month by promoting national awareness of adoption and the children awaiting families, celebrating children and families involved in adoption, and encouraging the people of the United States to secure safety, permanency, and well-being for all children.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the resolution.

Mr. BLUNT. I ask unanimous consent that the resolution be agreed to, the

preamble be agreed to, and the motions to reconsider be laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The resolution (S. Res. 315) was agreed to.

The preamble was agreed to.

(The resolution, with its preamble, is printed in today's RECORD under "Submitted Resolutions.")

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, before I start my remarks, let me say how pleased I am to see Senator REED and Senator COLLINS here with this important bill, the opportunity to amend the bill and do the business we should be doing.

This Senator is also glad to be here with Senator KLOBUCHAR. She and I co-chair the Senate side of the congressional caucus on adoption, and the resolution that was just agreed to adopts November as National Adoption Month, and November 21 as National Adoption Day. While we are here talking about this, all of our States have kids who need to be adopted.

If you went to the Missouri Department of Social Services Web site today, you would find 114 foster youth who are ready and waiting to be adopted. If you looked around the country today, you would find that there are 415,000 children in the U.S. foster care system and 108,000 of those kids are waiting to be adopted. Last year 22,000 young men and women aged out of the foster care system and they never got that opportunity for the permanent home, the forever home that could make such a difference in their lives, not only as a kid but their lives as an adult.

I have two or three kids I want to talk about. Austin is 12. He is full of energy. He has a great smile. He is extremely active, as lots of 12-year-old boys are. He loves to be outside. He enjoys, as he would phrase it, "going on adventures." He likes animals. He would like to live on a farm one day. He likes basketball. He likes being on his basketball team, but mostly he would like to have a family. Mostly his dream is the dream that he would have a family to encourage him and support him.

There are two other young brothers, aged 11 and 7. When you first meet Mykez, you can tell he is relaxed. He is laid back. He is an easy guy to be with. In his free time he likes being active. He likes to be on his bike. He likes to play football. If it is possible being outdoors, he would like to be outdoors, but he is also happy with a video game or with the TV. At school he likes history class the best, but his best grade in school is art. His brother Jameer appears to be pretty shy and quiet, but once he gets to know you, he easily turns on the charm. He is a football and basketball guy as well, but he enjoys quiet activities such as drawing, reading, and coloring. He loves being with his brother. He loves video games. His favorite class is math, earning his highest grade there. But what they

would like is a family. They would like a family that would allow them to keep in contact with their siblings but would also give them some structure, some attention, and some consistency that has been missing in their life.

Marissa is 5. She has some challenges. She is a sweet, loving girl. She is happy, curious, and loves to laugh. She has a hard time right now expressing herself in lots of other ways. She is working on building her vowels and consonant sounds. She works on her sign language vocabulary. She has a spunky attitude, but she would melt the heart of a future family if those things ever become connected.

There are tens of thousands of children all over the country just like them who just need a family—tens of thousands of children where a family could make all the difference in the world, not only when they are growing up but when they are adults and they have that family to turn back to.

Nobody is better to work with on these issues than Senator KLOBUCHAR. I ask unanimous consent to enter into a colloquy with her and then come back to me in a little bit after she has had a chance to talk about the importance of National Adoption Month and National Adoption Day.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I actually would have a question, first, of Senator BLUNT, because I know he is the parent of an adopted child from Russia.

I heard a rumor they are traveling to every State in the Union; is that correct?

Mr. BLUNT. We are trying.

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. OK, good. I wanted to get that on the record because I know he wanted to come to North Dakota, which is everyone's dream, and so Senator BLUNT asked for some advice from me to go to the great State of North Dakota.

Your child whom you adopted is Russian, and we have so many issues with some of these countries, from Russia to the Congo. I know families in Minnesota who have adopted children from Russia, and they were just ready to adopt the sibling. They met the brother or sister—and of course the kids know the brother or sister—and then the curtain was brought down, and those kids were literally pawns in a political game when Russia stopped all adoptions.

Senator BLUNT is hosting a meeting with the people involved in adoptions in the Congo. We have had a similar situation where the visas were pulled and the parents who visited these kids and are ready to adopt these kids haven't been able to do that.

I wondered if Senator BLUNT could comment on the situation with these countries and what the Senator thinks we can do.

Mr. BLUNT. I think this is a problem, and there are lots of families in the United States who would love to

have kids from wherever in the world kids are who need families. The two examples you have just given are some of the frustrations of international adoption in just the last few years, where thousands of kids were coming to the United States from other countries such as China, Ethiopia, Guatemala, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and certainly from Russia.

The tragedy of so many of these stories is that the child has suddenly seen that opportunity, they have bonded with families, and they have gone through the whole process. Many people, when Russia stopped Russian adoptions, were ready to go to court, had been to Russia multiple times and had exchanged visits and photos. Not only is it that the family is ready for the adoption to occur, but, more importantly, the person who is to be adopted is ready for the adoption to occur.

Just to show what can happen, in the case of Russia, the kids who were closest to being adopted by American families, the Russian Government suddenly created incentives to put them at the top of a list that doesn't get much attention, which gave special incentives to Russian families to adopt these kids before the American families who were ready to welcome them could adopt them.

We are having a meeting today with the Ambassador from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and I am grateful the Ambassador would come. Our real concern there is that there are many kids in the Congo who had actually been adopted. There was a commission that had been put in place to study the question of why they can't get their exit visas now to leave with the families the courts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have said could adopt these kids and that group has been disbanded. All that is necessary there is the exit opportunity—the exit permission—to leave the country to go with the families who have already legally adopted them.

The Senator and I and several of our colleagues are going to meet with the Ambassador today. We are glad he is coming. We would like to see that meeting result in going back and looking at cases where their government has already decided this is a great match for these kids and these families and figure out how to let those families get their kids to the United States.

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Thank you. This is also very important in my State. As I mentioned, we have the highest rate of international adoptions in the country. We have families who have opened their hearts and their homes to kids from every country, including Vietnam, Guatemala, Nepal, and Haiti.

In my background as county attorney, for 8 years I oversaw the lawyers who worked with foster care and adoptions. We made it a huge priority to try to speed up the process for kids to be adopted from foster care. Right now in our country nearly 400,000 children are living without permanent families

in the foster care system. Over 100,000 of these children are eligible for adoption, but too many of them will languish for years in foster care—often-times with very good families for them, but obviously a permanent home is what you want.

We talked about international adoptions around the world. There are estimated to be nearly 18 million orphans who have lost both parents and are living in orphanages or on the streets who want, again, a permanent home.

Senator BLUNT talked about some examples from his own State. One example is the Hatch family. Emerson Hatch was one of these orphaned children. They started the process to adopt her from India in 2000. Emerson was one of 300 kids living in an orphanage built to house 34 children.

The Indian Government refused to release her, and the family had to endure a 2-year wait, an earthquake, and a contested election in India before they were finally able to get her out of India with 1 minute to spare before her passport expired. She was malnourished, 2 years old but only weighed 14 pounds and was in poor health.

But with a lot of love and the help of the Adoption Medicine Clinic at the University of Minnesota, Emerson and the Hatch family are thriving. She is in high school, and the family is passionate about giving orphans permanent, loving homes.

There are many things that this Senate can do. The first, as Senator BLUNT explained, is leading efforts when countries put up barriers for no good reason. Obviously, sometimes you will have legal issues in countries with corruption or other reasons why there is a pause in adoptions. But when countries are putting up barriers for no good reasons and for reasons that are fairly transparent, we must lead and work with other Senators across the aisle to get this done.

The second is legislation. We have had a number of successful bills passed in the Senate. The bill I am probably proudest of is something that I did with Senator SESSIONS and Senator INHOFE, which was to allow older siblings to come in internationally when a younger sibling had been adopted. What was happening is kids would turn 17 after holding the family together as the oldest sibling, and then they would no longer be eligible for adoption.

We had a family out of the Philippines with nine children, and the oldest two kids helped hold them together in an orphanage and then they turned too old to be adopted. That family I will never forget. The Merkourises came to me and said: Well, we have these choices. We can adopt the seven kids and leave the two behind—it was like a “Sophie's Choice”—or we can leave them all there because we want them to stay together or you can change the law. That was the discussion.

So I worked with my colleagues. I will never forget. The Merkourises

came with pictures of these children on their iPads and went around to the offices of House Members and Senators who were holding up the bill and showed them to their staff members. The staff members would call our staff crying and said: OK, well, we won't hold it up anymore. And we were able to get that passed.

To Senator BLUNT, I was able to be with that family in their home, a farmhouse that they have expanded. It was like a Philippine version of “The Sound of Music.” They are an incredible family. I just talked to them a few months ago, and they are doing very well.

This is, I would argue to our colleagues, a bipartisan area in Congress. It is something we can do across the aisle, but it is also something where we can make significant difference—not just in one family's life but in many, many families' lives.

I thank the Senator for his work and his continued leadership in this area.

Mr. BLUNT. I would say in this regard that there are several things we are trying to do that we are still working on with Senator KLOBUCHAR and others together. Clearly, there are great stories to be told.

One thing we don't want to forget with National Adoption Month and National Adoption Day is the many families and the many individuals who benefit from adoptions. It is very easy to talk about the frustrations of trying to make things work better—the foster kids who aren't adopted, the international kids who should be here who have families who want them to be here.

We also want to talk about the many success stories. We had an Angels in Adoption event just a few weeks ago and recognized from virtually every State a family that had done something extraordinary, such as the family who took a family from the Philippines. Expanding the farmhouse is probably job one if you are going to bring nine more people into your house.

The Supporting Adoptive Families Act, the Timely Mental Health for Foster Youth Act, and the Adoption Tax Credit Refundability Act all need attention to make adoption work and to make it easier. It is life changing for everybody involved and, in most cases, it is life changing not just for the family but for anybody who really knows the family and sees what happens when people are able to reach out, become a family, and make a difference in the moment but also to make a difference forever.

I will let Senator KLOBUCHAR finish, but working on these issues is important, and it is bipartisan. You are never going to find anybody who says: Well, we don't need that. But we do need to be sure we are paying the kind of attention that we need to make this work better, to make it easier, and to increase the chances that adoptive families not only are able to become adoptive families but that they are

also able and more likely to be successful adoptive families.

Again, I thank Senator KLOBUCHAR for her leadership and for her work.

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Thank you.

As you know, our work is never done. We have a number of bills out there for which we have bipartisan support and that we are going to work on.

I think my last statement would be that our kids deserve so much more than just a roof over their heads and a bed to sleep in. Each and every child deserves a loving home, a nurturing family, and a brighter future. That is what National Adoption Month is all about, and that is why Senator BLUNT and I are on the floor today. That is why all of us have a responsibility to carry on this torch and to keep fighting for these children.

I thank Senator BLUNT.

I yield the floor.

TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2016—Continued

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I ask to speak on one other subject briefly for 2 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS PERFORMANCE BONUSES

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I rise today to express my concern that the Department of Veterans Affairs chose to issue performance bonuses to senior executives, including the director of the St. Paul Regional Office of the Veterans Benefits Administration, despite recent revelations of improper and dishonest conduct.

According to a report released by the VA's Office of the Inspector General in September, two VBA executives used their positions to assign themselves to different jobs that involve fewer responsibilities while maintaining their higher salaries. They actually assigned themselves to a different job where they had to work less and then kept their high salaries.

One of them was a woman named Kim Graves, the director of the Veterans Benefits Administration St. Paul Regional Office since October 2014. The inspector general found that Ms. Graves used her influence as director of the VBA's Eastern Area Office to compel the relocation of the previous St. Paul office director. So she moved that person and then moved herself into the job. She then proceeded to submit her own name for consideration and fill the vacancy that she had just created.

Taking on the job of directing the St. Paul Regional Office was actually a step down in responsibility for Ms. Graves. In the inspector general's words, she "went from being responsible for oversight of 16 [regional offices] to being responsible for only 1 [regional office]," but she kept her Senior Executive Service salary of \$173,949 per year. She also received over \$129,000 in relocation expenses.

In spite of this behavior, Ms. Graves received an \$8,687 performance bonus this year. The St. Cloud VA health care system chief of staff, Susan Markstrom, received a performance bonus as well the same year she was reported with some mismanagement issues.

A chief of staff collecting bonuses while running off nurses and doctors and a senior executive using her position to push out one of her colleagues and give herself a plum assignment with fewer responsibilities but the same high salary are the kinds of actions that create a breach of trust. I am generally proud of Veterans Affairs. We obviously have issues in our health system with backlogs and other problems, but there are a lot of hard-working people who work in Veterans Affairs who should be lauded for that work because our veterans deserve nothing but the best.

But in this case, I thank the inspector general for being willing to look into this difficult case and shedding light on what has been happening. The conduct is unacceptable and further erodes trust.

It is commendable that the VA inspector general took action by referring these two cases to the U.S. attorney for possible criminal prosecution. The VA needs to do right by our veterans and taxpayers by holding bad actors accountable and implementing reforms to prevent exploitation such as this from ever happening again.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CASSIDY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 310

Mr. CASSIDY. Mr. President, I rise today in support of S. 310, the Eliminating Government-funded Oil-painting Act, or the EGO Act. I would like to thank my colleagues, Chairman RON JOHNSON and Ranking Member TOM CARPER of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Their committee considered the EGO Act in its business meeting of June 24, 2015, and reported it favorably without amendment.

The Eliminating Government-funded Oil-painting Act is commonsense legislation that bans the Federal Government from spending taxpayer dollars on oil paintings of Presidents, Vice Presidents, Cabinet Secretaries, or Members of Congress. These paintings can cost as much as \$40,000 and are often placed in a back hall of a government bureaucracy, never to be seen by the public.

I will note that \$40,000 is the same as the average annual wage of a worker in Louisiana. Think about it—that worker worked a whole year, and what she

earned is what the Federal Government will spend on the painting of a Cabinet Secretary who serves for 6 months, and then the painting is put in the back of a building, never to be seen.

With trillions in debt, there is more to do in our obligation to spend taxpayers' money wisely, but this is a start.

I offer my strong support for the EGO Act and urge its passage.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Calendar No. 165, S. 310; I further ask that the bill be read a third time and passed and that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. REID. I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

Mr. CASSIDY. Mr. President, I have no clue why the esteemed Democratic leader objects. All I can say is that is an incredible insensitivity to working families. I have no clue.

There is a family out there right now struggling, not sure if they can pay their rent or their mortgage. They are going to lose their car. Their children will go to school in old clothes and maybe hungry because the amount of money they earn per year is not enough. They look at people in Washington like a new version of "The Hunger Games"—it is the Capital of this country, and all the riches of this country are brought here to the Capital for paintings of government officials, to be hidden away, while they struggle to make their mortgage, their car note, and to make sure their child is properly fed.

That people in government would be insensitive to those families shows the problem. That people in Washington would be insufficiently aware that the average family is making \$40,000 a year—the same as what one of these paintings can cost—and not care is an indictment of those who do not care.

I regret that there is objection to this, but we will bring it up later.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maine.

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business for up to 20 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I am here to speak in what is probably my 119th "Time to Wake Up" speech related to climate change.