

Senator Chris Van Hollen on The Challenge of Today's Political Environment

By Mary Lou Fox

At WDC's sold-out December luncheon, Senator Chris Van Hollen began and ended his remarks on a high note: "It's great to be here as you all give me hope." In between, his remarks were more somber.

"How did this happen to our country?" is his first thought as he wakes each morning. His second is a vow to redouble his efforts to change what has happened while urging everyone to do the same. This is a serious and dangerous moment for the country as all of our democratic institutions are being tested. Because an important opposition movement has grown in this country, more people are becoming engaged.

Despite the significant partisanship in Washington, Senator Van Hollen believes that the country itself is not as partisan. When Congressional Republicans tried to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA) throughout 2017, opposition grew to the point that even many Republicans began to think it was a bad idea. It is difficult to pass legislation when so many people say "no."

Their health care effort taught the Republicans an important lesson: the longer a bad idea is out there; the more people dislike it. They learned that bills should be moved quickly before the opposition has a chance to organize. This is the approach that they took with the tax bill, which they passed very quickly.

The tax bill is not **tax reform** but a **massive tax cut** for wealthy individuals and corporations who are already reporting record profits. Inequality will only worsen, as the tax code was already tilted toward the wealthy. In fact, 35% of the shareholders of large corporations are not Americans; yet these corporations will get a \$35 billion tax cut in 2019 by taking the money from US taxpayers to pay their foreign shareholders.

How did they pay for the bill? Most tax cuts on the "little guy" will end and many millions will pay more, especially as state and local taxes are capped (a big issue in Maryland). The end of the ACA's individual mandate will also add to the overall revenue stream.

The tax cut will result in another big problem – pressure to cut spending to reduce the deficit and debt. Speaker Paul Ryan has always supported the need to reform entitlements to reduce the debt. The Budget Reconciliation Act, which allowed the tax cut bill to pass with a simple majority, included a \$1 trillion cut to Medicaid and a \$500 billion cut to Medicare, as well as reduced domestic spending. (Reconciliation is a legislative process of the United States Congress that allows expedited passage of certain budgetary legislation on spending, revenues, and the federal debt limit with a simple majority vote in both the House, with 218 votes, and the Senate, with 51 votes. In order for the reconciliation process to be used, the legislation in question must be revenue neutral.)

Because of the tax bill, there is less spending capability for many major items that are important to Democrats, such as reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), funding Community Health Centers, and establishing a permanent Dreamers program. The proposed DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) would create a multi-phase process for qualifying alien minors in the United States that would first grant conditional residency and, upon meeting further qualifications, permanent residency.

Senator Van Hollen went on to discuss political steps Democrats should pursue in 2018:

- Keep the tax cut debate going by asking people whether they got their \$4000 wage increase that Trump promised for the tax cut;
- Ensure that people vote in the midterms;
- Flip 24 Republican House seats to Democratic to take back the House of Representatives; and
- Hold 25 Democratic Senate seats (10 of them in states Trump won and only five in typical Democratic states) and take the three open seats in Nevada, Arizona and Tennessee.

In addition, he recommended pushing these policy initiatives:

- Establish a CEO/Employee Fairness Act which would prevent deductions of executive bonuses unless the employees get raises;
- Control the cost of prescription drugs;
- Establish free community college, which would support skills building and job training; and
- Keep emphasizing the fundamental fact that the tax bill is evil.

The Senator went on to say that Marylanders must defeat Governor Hogan. Hogan was silent on the ACA fight, even when other Republican governors were leaders in the fight against the bill. Hogan did not come out against the ACA repeal until it was obvious that it was likely to fail. He was also silent on the tax fight even though it will have a major impact on Maryland voters. We must make the governor's race a referendum on Trump and emphasize that we need a governor who will fight for Maryland.

In closing, Senator Van Hollen asked us to do two things:

- Listen to and talk to voters, especially about kitchen table issues; and
- Effectively communicate the damage that Trump and the Republicans are doing to voters, especially in "red" areas in Maryland.