

Archer slow on fast-track

BY STEVE CHARNOVITZ

Several days ago, House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Archer sent a letter to President Clinton criticizing him for failing to do enough to obtain new "fast-track" trade negotiating authority: "I am disappointed," the Texas Republican lamented, "that your administration's delay in seeking fast-track authority will translate directly into missed opportunities for our companies and our workers."

Yet the charges in his letter ring hollow. Mr. Archer is head of the congressional committee responsible for initiating trade legislation. His blaming Mr. Clinton is mistargeted.

Beginning in 1974, the Congress has granted fast-track authority to successive presidents to negotiate new trade agreements. Although presidents have the constitutional authority to conduct trade negotiations without fast track, other governments are reluctant to negotiate with the United States in the absence of this special congressional procedure. New fast-track authority is typically enacted as part of omnibus trade legislation. This occurred in the Trade Act of 1974, the Trade Agreements Act of 1979, and the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988.

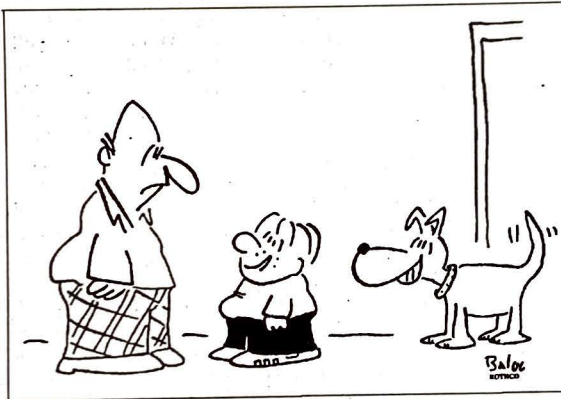
Following the passage of legislation to implement the Uruguay Round in November 1994, the Clinton administration has repeatedly indicated that it wants renewal of fast track. When he took over the reins of Ways and Means Committee in January 1995, Mr. Archer acknowledged on several occasions that fast track would be a priority for him. Indeed, his recent letter to Mr. Clinton declares, "As you know, I am a strong supporter of extending your administration fast-track authority to negotiate and implement trade agreements."

His words don't translate into deeds. He has not yet shown the parliamentary talent of his

predecessors, such as Dan Rostenkowski and Wilbur Mills. According to the U.S. Constitution, tariff legislation must originate in the House of Representatives. Under House rules, it must start in the Ways and Means Committee. Thus, all roads to fast track begin with Mr. Archer.

In his well-publicized letter to Mr. Clinton, Mr. Archer complains that "no concrete steps have been taken" to have the fast-track law enacted. It is unclear what concrete steps Mr. Archer seeks. Mr. Clinton, his

the Clinton administration is blameless. It should be doing more to promote rapid action on fast track. Recent statements by Secretary of Commerce William Daley that the absence of fast track would not impede U.S. participation in Western Hemisphere trade talks have muddied the waters as to whether fast track is essential. The Clinton administration must stick to consistent line. It cannot tell foreign governments that fast track is not needed while simultaneously telling Congress that fast track is needed.



"Can I keep him, Dad? — He's illiterate and homeless."

trade representative and Treasury Secretary Bob Rubin have stated repeatedly that they want new fast-track authority. The ball is clearly in Mr. Archer's court, as it has been since January 1995.

Over the past few months, Mr. Archer and some of his Republican colleagues have argued it is up to the Clinton administration to propose a specific fast-track proposal. The administration might have done this, and perhaps should have. But the notion that the executive branch is responsible for preparing the first draft of legislation is a strange one, particularly coming from a powerful congressional committee traditionally jealous of its prerogative to write tax and trade law. Other congressional leaders are not as deferential.

Speaker Newt Gingrich, for example, did not insist on receiving blueprints from the White House before moving to implement the "Contract With America" in 1995.

This is not to suggest that

The administration should also spell out its intention with regard to linking trade with environment and labor issues. At least some of the wariness by business groups and Republicans stems from uncertainty about what is envisioned in such a linkage. Clearly, no specific formulation is going to please everyone as there are a wide array of views on these matters. But any reasonable, middle-of-the-road position might defuse a large block of potential opposition to fast track. Besides, whatever approach the administration proposes will be subject to review by the next president. So new fast-track language does have to have a timeless quality.

Some Congress-watchers believe that Mr. Archer will make up any excuse to avoid empowering Mr. Clinton to negotiate new trade agreements. Others take him at his word that he is a "strong supporter" of granting new fast-track authority. Mr. Archer can settle this debate by sending Mr. Clinton more urgent legislation and fewer self-serving letters.

If he is willing to work more closely with leading Democrats on Ways and Means, like congressmen Charlie Rangel and Bob Matsui, he can draw up a fast-track bill attracting broad support.

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