

The Telegraph

The Republican refuseniks were not 'extreme' - they were defending democracy

Douglas Carswell

Anyone that believes in limited government should cheer the way in which the holdouts secured a set of important concessions



House Speaker Kevin McCarthy of Calif., right, walks to the House floor on Capitol Hill

What a farce! Having won a narrow majority in the US House of Representatives back in November, last week the Republicans could not even agree on who should be Speaker.

For the first time in living memory, a Speaker was not elected on the first ballot as a handful of Republican Representatives refused to support Kevin McCarthy. Eventually, after 15 votes – and plenty of concessions to the Republican refuseniks – McCarthy scrapped together just enough votes to get the job.

Such shenanigans, some will scoff, are yet more evidence of America's political dysfunction. A Trumpian faction, others insist, is so intent on waging war against the political establishment that they are making America ungovernable.

Hang on a second. That narrative is nonsense. What happened last week shows not dysfunction, but the first stirrings of a long overdue renewal within one of Washington's most moribund institutions.

Lazy journalists might find it easy to portray the Republican refuseniks as Trumpian, but Trump does not explain why they withheld their support from Kevin McCarthy.

The 45th President supported McCarthy for Speaker unequivocally, as did many of his more strident supporters in the House. Indeed, [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#) was reported to have him on the end of her cell phone, as she tried to encourage the last few holdouts to fall into line.

What eventually brought the Republican rebels into line was neither Trump nor Greene, but a series of concessions that they wrung from McCarthy.

Sick and tired of watching Congress rubber stamp decisions, they sought a series of changes to the House procedures that would enable them, as the elected representatives of the people, to have a greater say.

Thanks to the concessions they won, in the 118th Congress, there will be a vote on a balanced budget amendment. Efforts to raise the nation's debt ceiling must be paired with spending cuts. Appropriations bills will have to be moved individually.

Having served in the British House of Commons for 12 years, a legislature in which individual members have not had the ability to amend budget bills in over a generation, I cannot tell you how vital I believe it is for an effective legislature to have the power of the purse. If Congress were to give up the power to control federal spending, the socialisation of America will become both inevitable and irreversible.

Anyone that believes in limited government should cheer the way in which the Republican holdouts secured a set of concessions that will mean Congress can now cap the ability of the administrative state to make discretionary spending decisions. The House will once again have the power to reduce the salary of government officials.

Alarmed at the way that the previous Speaker, [Nancy Pelosi](#), re-wrote the House rule book to give her greater power, Republican refuseniks also insisted on restoring the power to members to trigger a motion of no confidence in the Speaker at any time. The key word here is 'restore'. The Republican party's awkward squad in the House successfully sought to give back to members of the House powers that are rightfully theirs.

Back in 2009 in Britain, I tabled a motion of confidence in the Speaker of the House of Commons. This led to the removal of the then Speaker [for the first time in over 300 years](#). The biggest challenge I had in ousting a Speaker who was clearly not up to the job was not garnering support from within the legislature. It was figuring out a procedure to move the motion. It is vital that members of the US House of Representatives retain a clear process for removing a redundant Speaker.

Last, but not least, the rebels won a concession which means that they will have at least 72 hours to review bills before they come to the floor. Stop and ask yourself why this has not been happening in the first place?

Those elected to the House of Representatives are sent to Washington DC to make laws. How are they able to do that if they do not even have time to study and consider the bills they are expected to vote on?

As for the idea that what happened in Washington last week was unprecedented, there have been 14 previous occasions when there were multiple votes to choose a Speaker. Back in the mid-19th century, the 34th Congress took 133 ballots before deciding.

The House might have had to take a couple of extra days to choose a Speaker, but it will be time well spent if it means that elected lawmakers rediscover how to do their jobs.

Over the past half-century or so, the law in America has ceased to be a set of clearly defined statutes given effect by those that we elect. 'The law' has instead come to mean a set of rules generated by various branches of the administrative state to whom Congress has delegated too much decision-making. The power to allocate public money has been given to those that are not directly answerable to the public.

Last week saw a concerted effort to restore to the House of Representatives the role and responsibilities Congress should never have conceded. That is not evidence that American democracy is dysfunctional. It might just show us how American democracy can be renewed.

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