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House of Representatives

The House met at 12:30 p.m. and was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mr. NETHERCUTT).

DESIGNATION OF SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore laid before the House the following communication from the Speaker:

WASHINGTON, DC,
April 21, 1998.

I hereby designate the Honorable George R. Nethercutt, Jr. to act as Speaker pro tempore on this day.

NEWT GINGRICH,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

MESSAGE FROM THE SENATE

A message from the Senate by Mr. Lundregan, one of its clerks, announced that the Senate had passed with amendments in which the concurrence of the House is requested, bills of the House of the following titles:

H.R. 629. An act to grant the consent of the Congress to the Texas Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Compact.

H.R. 3130. An act to provide for an alternative penalty procedure for States that fail to meet Federal child support data processing requirements, to reform Federal incentive payments for effective child support performance, to provide for a more flexible penalty procedure for States that violate interjurisdictional adoption requirements, to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to make certain aliens determined to be delinquent in the payment of child support inadmissible and ineligible for naturalization, and for other purposes.

The message also announced that pursuant to Public Law 105–78, the Chair, on behalf of the Democratic Leader, appoints Dr. Robert C. Talley, of South Dakota, as a member of the National Health Museum Commission.

MORNING HOUR DEBATES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 21, 1997, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning hour debates. The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to 30 minutes, and each Member, except the majority leader, the minority leader, or the minority whip, limited to 5 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. WELLER) for 5 minutes.

UNFAIRNESS IN TAX CODE: MARRIAGE TAX PENALTY

Mr. WELLER. Mr. Speaker, I represent a very, very diverse district. I represent the south side of Chicago, the south suburbs, as well as a lot of bedroom and rural communities southwest of the city of Chicago. There is a common series of questions being asked, and these questions really illustrate why passage of the Marriage Tax Elimination Act is so very important to this Congress.

These questions are pretty simple, and that is do Americans feel that it is fair that a married working couple with two incomes pays more in taxes just because they are married? Do Americans feel that it is fair that 21 million married working couples pay an average of $1,400 more in higher taxes just because they are married than an identical couple that lives together outside of marriage? Do Americans feel it is fair that our Tax Code actually provides an incentive to get divorced?

It is clear that the marriage tax penalty is not only wrong; frankly, it is immoral that our Tax Code punishes our society's most basic institution.

This past year, the Congressional Budget Office in a report detailed the facts that the marriage penalty is suffered by 21 million married working couples to the tune of $1,400 each. Of course, that tax is caused because when a married couple chooses to get married, they file jointly, and their combined tax income pushes them into a higher tax bracket, of course, causing that marriage tax penalty.

Let me give you an example of a married couple in the 11th Congressional District in the south suburbs of Chicago. This particular gentleman is a machinist who works at Caterpillar making the heavy equipment that builds our roads and bridges. This particular machinist makes $30,500 a year.

If he is single, after standard deductions and exemptions on his taxes, he pays the 15 percent rate. But say he meets a gal, she is a tenured schoolteacher at the Joliet public schools. She is making an identical amount of money, $30,500 a year. They choose to get married.

Under our current Tax Code, because of the way our Tax Code is currently structured, as a married couple with two incomes, they file jointly, they are pushed into a higher tax bracket producing almost $1,400 more in taxes, just because they chose to get married.

That is wrong. If you think about it for this married couple in Joliet, this machinist and this schoolteacher, $1,400 is a lot of money. It is real money for real people. $1,400 is one year's tuition at Joliet Junior College. It is several months of car payments. It is 3 months' worth of child care in a local day care center in Joliet. That is important to working families.

Of course, the President has talked about helping working couples with expanding the child care tax credit, and that is a good idea. Of course, we should look at what that means in comparing expanding the child tax credit to eliminating the marriage penalty, and how this machinist and schoolteacher will benefit.

Under the Marriage Tax Elimination Act, of course, this machinist and schoolteacher will save $1,400 by eliminating the marriage tax penalty. Under

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the President's proposal on child care, they would be able to save $358 in higher take-home pay.

So the question is, which is better? One thousand four hundred dollars, which is 3 months' worth of day care in Joliet, or the President's proposal for $358, which is 3 weeks? Which is better, three weeks or three months, when it comes to helping working families?

Clearly, elimination of the marriage tax penalty will help 21 million married working couples. I am pleased to tell you the Marriage Tax Elimination Act now has 238 cosponsors. And what is the bottom line? We should make elimination of the marriage tax penalty our Number 1 priority as we work to provide greater tax relief and work to help working families keep more of what they earn, because we believe that working families should be able to keep more of what they earn, because you can spend it so much better back home than we can for you here in Washington.

When the Tax Code is unfair, just as the marriage tax penalty is unfair, we should eliminate it. We should eliminate it now.

If we look back at this Congress over the last several years, we have helped families in 1996 with the adoption tax credit to help families provide a loving home for a child in need of adoption. In 1997, we, of course, created the $500 per child tax credit, which is going to benefit 3 million Illinois children $1.50 in higher take-home pay, that will stay in Illinois rather than come to Washington.

In 1998, let us stop punishing marriage. In 1998, let's help this machinist and this schoolteacher in Joliet, and the other 21 million working married couples with two incomes who pay more in taxes just because they are married.

Mr. Speaker, let us stop punishing marriage. Let us make elimination of the marriage tax penalty our top priority, the centerpiece of this year's budget agreement. Let us eliminate the marriage tax penalty and let us eliminate it now.

PROVIDING TRANSIT PASSES TO HOUSE EMPLOYEES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. BLUMENAUER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. BLUMENAUER. Mr. Speaker, in honor of tomorrow being Earth Day, I think it appropriate for us to pause for a moment and consider one of these pictures that is worth 1,000 words.

This photo of the block above the Metro South Station immediately behind the Cannon Building makes crystal clear how we in the House of Representatives can use our resources to improve the environment around us.

Tens of millions of dollars are being proposed right now to help the District of Columbia, an area that is in decline, that is fighting road congestion, air pollution, with some rather elaborate proposals. Yet each day 5,000 people exit this transit station on their way to work in and around Capitol Hill, and it suggests a simple solution to encourage less traffic, less sprawl, and revitalize Washington, D.C.

Consider for a moment the over 6,000 parking spaces the House reserves for those employees who drive. These spots are on hold, guarded, secure 24 hours a day. They cost the taxpayer approximately $1,500 a year per employee per parking space. On the other hand, employees who use public transportation are totally on their own. They have to meet the costs of their transportation, even though they work side-by-side with employees for whom the $1,500 per year worth of transportation costs are covered by the House.

Now, I have no problem with people who want to or must drive to work. I do find it odd, however, that we encourage it over taking public transit, particularly after we have invested over $10 billion for the transit program here in Washington, D.C. As an employer, we are sending hardly an Earth friendly message to our employees that we will only help them if they drive their car to work. We are ignoring those who take transit, the MARC train, Virginia Rail Express; you are out of luck.

Imagine for a moment what this would look like if 312 drivers did not park their cars, and instead it could be used for a park, an expansion of the Library of Congress, for that visitors center that we talk about.

For years, we have encouraged in the Federal Government, the private sector to join in the fight for cleaner air by reducing single-occupant vehicle trips. In and around the District of Columbia alone, over 1,000 businesses are members of the Washington Metro Transit Authority's Metro Pool Program that provides a Metro check. Over 50,000 public and private sector employees in D.C. regularly use this service. Yet while we have encouraged private businesses to offer transit benefits, the House of Representatives is one of the few, and certainly the most visible Federal office not to offer transit benefits to its employees. It sounds a little bit hypocritical to me.

The following Federal Agencies do offer these benefits: The Senate, the Senate of the United States Congress, the Office of the Architect of the Capitol, the Congressional Budget Office, the Bureau of Public Debt, the Supreme Court. Did I mention the Senate? One hundred thirty-four other Federal employers provide over 30,000 employees benefits for the metropolitan area.

I think it is time that we give House Members the same option that the United States Senate has had for its employees for over 5 years. I think we in the House are smart enough to do it, our employees deserve this modest tax benefit, and it is a low-cost option that will improve the livability for our Nation's Capital.

I would suggest that it is time for us to look back here for a moment and imagine what would happen if we have only 5 percent of our employees who take advantage of this opportunity. We could have an opportunity to improve the environment, use our resources more effectively, and, in the long term, it would make a big difference in the budget of the House of Representatives.

I would urge strongly my colleagues to join with me and over 150 other cosponsors to add their name to House Resolution 37 that would provide an optional transportation benefit for House offices; that would provide the same $21 per month tax benefit to our employees that has been given to the Senate. It was based on entirely using existing office funds; no additional requirement is necessary.

I hope that this is something that we can take a small step to recognize our obligation to the environment.

CUTTING EXPENSES AT THE UNITED NATIONS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. STEARNS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. STEARNS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to call the House's attention to a very interesting article that appeared in the current issue of the National Review. The article is entitled ''Unreformed United Nations,'' and it is written by Stephen Halper, who is a former White House and State Department official. He writes a syndicated column and anchors Radio America's ''This Week From Washington.''

Many of the comments he had in this article, I think, are appropriate to bring to the attention of my colleagues. Many of us here in Congress believe we need major reform in the United Nations, and the time is now.

Boutros-Ghali, who was the former head of the United Nations, once told the Washington Post ''perhaps half the U.N. Staff does nothing useful.'' That is a staggering statement. Mr. Halper's argument is that Mr. Annan, who is the present head of the United Nations, is more tied to the U.N. bureaucracy, is a defender of the faith of the United Nations, and appears to be not committed to real reform. I hope this is not true.

Mr. Speaker, Congress has demanded reductions in the United Nations' worldwide staff of 53,000 people. Now, this does not include 10,000 consultants or the peacekeeping forces which reached 80,000 people in 1993 and reductions in the most generous salary and benefit package in public life. These are sort of simple things that I think most Members would agree with.

Mr. Annan, who is the leader of the United Nations, has put forward his own reform plan, and let me quote from his plan. ''Consolidate 12 secretarial departments into five, but without