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Senate

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EVERYONE ACT (cont.)

Mr. CARPER. Madam President, I appreciate the opportunity to rise in support of the amendment offered by Senators KENNEDY and BOXER to raise the minimum wage over the next 2½ years.

My staff provided me with some information about the history of the minimum wage. One important date cited is 1968, which was my senior year at Ohio State University. I had a couple of jobs then. I was the pots-and-pans man at the Delta Gamma sorority house. I also had a part-time job at the university bookstore. I was paid the minimum wage for both jobs, which at the time was \$1.60 per hour. If you adjust \$1.60 for inflation, then the minimum wage would presently be \$8.50 per hour.

Senators BOXER and KENNEDY propose that we gradually raise the minimum wage over the next 2½ years. They recommend raising it from the current level of \$5.15 per hour to \$5.85 in the next 60 days, from \$5.85 to \$6.45 a year later, and finally from \$6.45 to \$7 the following year.

Some have said that such an increase goes too far, too fast, and have suggested that we take a different approach. However, we should do some math on the decline of the

real value of the minimum wage. The current minimum wage has been \$5.15 per hour since 1997. If you adjust \$5.15 for inflation, then we would have a minimum wage of \$5.95 per hour. But, if you adjust the minimum wage for inflation from its 1968 level of \$1.60, then the minimum wage would presently be \$8.50.

Senators Kennedy and BOXER are right in the middle between the two, and I would suggest to my colleagues that they are not far off the mark. In fact, their amendment is a pretty good compromise.

I know that some people do not want to raise the minimum wage, and that they are concerned by the potential for job losses if we were to do so. And some of our employers—both large and small—have expressed concerns with an increase in the minimum wage and urge us to be mindful of those concerns.

Having said that, we also need to be mindful of minimum wage workers. Senator Kennedy shared with us some real-life examples. Let me share with you some of my own experience from when I was a college student earning the minimum wage. A lot of people who received the minimum wage in 1968 were not supporting a family.

I was not supporting a family in 1968. Many of them were students or just out of school.

But a lot of the people who earn the minimum wage these days are people with a family, with one child, or maybe two. They may be in a two-parent family. But in a lot of cases, a minimum wage earner is a single parent.

I urge my colleagues to keep this statistic in mind as we consider whether to support an increase in the minimum wage. If you or I were working full time, 40 hours a week for 52 weeks a year, with no time off, then we would be making about \$206 a week if we were paid the minimum wage. That is less than \$11,000 per year.

Madam President, less than \$11,000 per year does not crack the poverty line for one person, much less two or three.

As a Governor who worked on welfare reform in my state and with the National Governors Association I understand what it takes in order for people to move off of welfare. For people to move successfully from welfare to work, four things have to happen: One, they have to have a job to go to; they have to have a way to get to the job; they have to get some help with their health care; and they need some help with their childcare. Those four things: a job, the ability to get to a job, health care, and childcare are critical.

The other thing people have to have when they get off of welfare for work is the belief that they will be better off working than on welfare.

In my own State of Delaware, we adopted comprehensive welfare reform in the mid-1990s and phased in an increase in the minimum wage. Today, the minimum wage

in Delaware is \$6.15 per hour. We increased the minimum wage to help people move off of welfare. We wanted to make sure that they were better off working than on welfare.

I ask people to understand, whether you happen to be from Delaware or Maine—where the Presiding Officer is from—or from any other State, to try to make it these days on \$11,000 per year, while trying to hold a family together. It is incredibly difficult to do so.

The other thing I want to say is on a more macro-issue with respect to welfare reform legislation currently on the Senate floor. We should be able to pass welfare reform legislation. Both sides agree on about 90 percent of the issues. For those issues that we do not agree on, we should be able to reconcile our differences.

I believe that legislation I introduced with Senator Collins, the Presiding Officer, and with Senator Ben Nelson is a consensus bill on welfare reform—we think it is a pretty good compromise from what has been reported out of the committee and has some of the changes that Democrats would like to see. That bill is a good compromise.

On our side, we want to have an opportunity to offer relevant amendments to legislation before the Senate. One amendment is an increase in the minimum wage, which I think is relevant to this particular bill. A second amendment is an extension in unemployment compensation benefits. We should extend unemployment compensation benefits until our economy is stronger and we have more jobs for people looking to work.

Senator Harkin has an interest in offering an amendment on overtime regulations,

which has already passed the House and the Senate. He is determined to make sure he has a chance to offer that again.

We are smart enough around here to be able to work with our Republican colleagues to come up with an agreement that allows those three amendments to be offered.

Once those amendments are offered, we should be able to offer other relevant amendments to this welfare bill. I have a few amendments to offer, and I know others do as well. We should be able to agree on a reasonable number of amendments—it could be 10, 20. We could also agree to an amount of time on such amendments, for example, 10 minutes for proponents of the amendment and 10 minutes for opponents of the amendment. When the debate on an amendment is completed the Senate should vote.

I would be very disappointed if we went along and, at the end of next week, were not able to close our differences on welfare reform legislation and the FSC bill.

The last thing I will mention has to do with conference committees. When the House passes one bill, and the Senate passes a different bill, we end up, a lot of times, in a conference negotiation to resolve differences between the bills. And we, in the Democratic Party, have been stung because we have not been allowed to participate in these conferences.

We saw that happen with respect to the Energy bill, where Democrats were not invited to participate. We saw it happen to a large extent in the conference on the Medicare prescription drug bill, where, for the most part, Democrats were not allowed to participate in conference negotiations. We cannot allow that to continue. Democrats are

not going to allow that to continue. Someday Democrats will be in the majority. Someday our friends on the other side will be in the minority. I ask them to keep that in mind because what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

To the extent that we get closed out of conference committees without any active participation, the same thing could happen to them. I would not want to do it to them, and I do not like having it done to us.

Part of this universal agreement in moving welfare reform and getting the FSC bill onto the Senate floor is not just encouraging words about the conference, but a good, hard, fast agreement that Democrats will be full participants in a welfare reform conference with the House.

It is too bad that the presiding officer, Senator Collins, and I cannot work out these differences by ourselves. We would pass a bill that we negotiated with Senator Nelson of Nebraska. It would be pretty easy.

I do not mean to minimize nor make light of the toughness of the situation we face, but we can get this done. We need to get this done. We are going to take a recess week sometime around Good Friday. I sure hope we can go home having passed welfare reform legislation through the Senate, and to have made good progress on FSC legislation as well.

With respect to a reasonable increase in the minimum wage, we should be able to get that done. It is the right and fair thing to do. We need to have an extension of unemployment compensation benefits. While we have an official unemployment rate of about 5.6 percent, the rate is actually closer to 7.5 percent once you count all the

people who have run out of benefits or stopped looking for employment.

If we agree to those things, we ought to be able to get those bills done and move on to the next step in welfare reform. Welfare reform is a great experiment, made successful by our Nation's Governors. Members of the Senate know how to make it even more successful going forward.

It has been a pleasure to do business with the Presiding Officer and Senator Nelson on our side. I hope we can take some of the provisions in our bill and have an opportunity to offer them as an amendment to the bill in the next day or two.

I yield the floor.