

9/11 Panel Backs Senate Plan for Intelligence Overhaul

By PHILIP SHENON

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 20 - The members of the independent Sept. 11 commission joined together on Wednesday to endorse legislation to overhaul the nation's intelligence community, telling lawmakers that "half-hearted reform would leave us worse off than we are today."

In their most important policy statement since completing their final report in July, the commission's five Democrats and five Republicans offered strong support for provisions of a bipartisan Senate bill that would enact the panel's central recommendation: creation of the job of national intelligence director to coordinate the government's 15 spy agencies

"If the national intelligence director does not have strong authorities, then we do not believe such a position should be created," they said in a letter issued by the 9/11 Public Discourse Project, the education and lobbying group established by the commission members this fall.

The commissioners suggested that a rival Republican-authored House bill placed too many limits on the intelligence director's budget and personnel authority and that the House bill included many contentious law enforcement provisions that could derail an overall bill to overhaul the nation's intelligence agencies.

"We believe strongly that this bill is not the right occasion for tackling controversial immigration and law enforcement issues that go well beyond the commission's recommendations," the letter said. "Some provisions seem particularly inappropriate at this late moment."

On Tuesday, the White House made somewhat similar points in a letter to the negotiators favoring key elements of the Senate bill and opposing provisions of the House version making it easier to deport foreigners, but endorsing other law enforcement provisions of the House bill.

The commission's letter was addressed to Representative Peter Hoekstra, the Michigan Republican who is chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and who is leading a House-Senate conference committee to reconcile the two bills. Congressional leaders have asked that the compromise bill be ready before the Nov. 2 election.

The conference committee met Wednesday for the first time, with no clear sign of an early compromise. Some House Republicans made clear that they were determined to preserve the controversial law enforcement and immigration provisions in the House bill

and that they were wary of going as far as the Senate wants in granting powers to the national intelligence director, especially on issues involving military intelligence.

The law enforcement and immigration provisions would, among other things, expand the use of the death penalty in terrorism cases, expand the government's electronic surveillance authority against terror suspects and make it easier for the government to deport foreign citizens without court review.

"They're not extraneous provisions; they're vital," said Representative F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., the Wisconsin Republican who is chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. "We must not be deterred by the well-intentioned belief expressed by some that these ideas in the House bill are too controversial to be enacted."

After opening statements in which the House and Senate negotiators called upon one another to put aside partisan differences and agree quickly on a compromise, partisan rancor arose when Representative Hoekstra announced that House Republicans had been meeting privately in hopes of preparing a "good-faith global" proposal for a bill that could be presented to the conference.

The announcement met with an angry response from Representative Jane Harman of California, the ranking Democrat on the Intelligence Committee, who said that "whatever it is that you are planning to do has not been discussed with me at all, and I object to this process." She said a "Republican House product" would "derail what we're trying to do."

Trying to restore a sense of bipartisanship, Mr. Hoekstra quickly agreed that House Democrats would be allowed to review any proposal before it was shared with Senate negotiators. "Before we present anything to folks on the Senate side, we will have complete due diligence on the House side," he said. "We fully recognize that this is going to be a bipartisan, fully involved conference."

In a statement issued after the meeting, another member of the conference committee, Senator Frank R. Lautenberg, a New Jersey Democrat, criticized the move by House Republicans. "Out of the gate, we saw the House Republicans use a partisan tactic to try to force the committee to only consider the House version of the bill," he said. "Thankfully, under the watchful eye of the 9/11 families, bipartisanship won in this round."