

LAWMAKERS PLAN BIPARTISAN SESSION TO DEVELOP CONTINUITY PLANS FOR HOUSE

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May 13, 2002

Roll Call Daily

Following through on post-Sept. 11 talk of how to recover from a Congressional catastrophe, Republicans and Democrats will come together this week to brainstorm about what to do if a large number of House Members are killed or incapacitated.

While it is unlikely a proposal will come together immediately, House leaders and Congressional scholars hope that by holding the bipartisan meeting they can work toward a plan. Unlike the Senate, the House lacks a constitutional provision for appointing or electing new Members in the event of a tragedy.

Reps. Christopher Cox (Conn.), chairman of the GOP Policy Committee, and Martin Frost (Texas), chairman of the Democratic Caucus, are heading up the Thursday meeting, with chairmen and ranking members of committees of jurisdiction. While there has been much discussion, little consensus has been reached on how to proceed.

"We obviously hope nothing like that ever happens," Frost said in an interview. "But given what happened with September 11, we have to at least think about the possibility and how you would have continuity of the House of Representatives."

Norman Ornstein, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, said Monday the aim is to set up a formal process whereby House leaders can begin working toward recommendations.

"In some ways this is pretty stunning," said Ornstein, who will attend the session. "It's the

first time ever we've had the two party's policy committees meet jointly. That's a signal of the seriousness and intent of the leaders."

Possibilities for dealing with such a crisis include changing House rules, federal law or the Constitution. Ornstein, a Roll Call Daily contributing writer, said while the two former options are important, the latter is the critical piece.

Ornstein added there are a series of alternatives being suggested, but these are "knotty questions" and cannot be resolved overnight. Any real change -- especially a constitutional one -- will take time, he said.

"If we can get the process started, there's a slim chance we could get an amendment through the House this year," he said.

Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.) has proposed a constitutional amendment to allow governors to appoint temporary House Members if 25 percent or more of the body was killed or incapacitated. Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) has introduced a companion bill in the Senate calling for a replacement threshold of 50 percent of Members. Specter's version also requires that replacement Members come from the same political party.

Those constitutional amendment ideas have met some resistance, particularly from those who argue Members should be elected. A constitutional change requires support of a two-thirds majority in both chambers as well as approval by three-quarters of state legislatures.

Others have suggested a more immediate plan. Former Speakers Tom Foley (D-Wash.), who will also attend the gathering, and Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) have urged the House to change its rules to give each Member the power to pre-designate an interim successor.

House leaders said it is critical, because of the

differing views, to begin the discussions and try to move toward a solution.

"It would be unwise of us not to figure it out," said Frost. "This is just an initial meeting to talk about the various things we'll be working on."

"Any issue like this needs a full and open debate represented by both parties," said Greg Crist, spokesman for House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas). "These are positive signs in the right direction."