

LEGISLATIVE COLUMN

By PAUL FOGLEMAN, PUBLISHER



Trade policies were the focus of debates across the country as voters were courted by candidates for the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate. Executives and personnel in the hosiery industry were among the millions following the dialogue.

North Carolina, where 180,000 manufacturing jobs have disappeared in 24 months, was the scene of a classic encounter between Rep. Richard Burr, Republican, and Democrat Erskine Bowles, former Chief of Staff to President Bill Clinton. Both were vying for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Vice President nominee John Edwards.

Two years ago, Rep. Burr turned a cold shoulder to a delegation from the Carolina Hosiery Assn. which visited his Washington offices. Two large hosiery companies which are pursuing free trade strategies are in his district and Burr made it clear he would follow free trade policies of the President.

However during the debate, Burr sang a different tune. He claimed he voted against open-door trade with China four times. Then he later admitted that he has changed his position on trade. (Flip flop). And again he insisted he will continue to support the policies of President Bush.

Bowles who has proposed no new trade agreements until current ones are evaluated and renegotiated for "fairness" also admitted he had promoted passage of NAFTA under Clinton. (Flip flop). But Bowles made it clear he would oppose any future trade agreement that did not accompany a study measuring its impact on American manufacturing.

The Alabama congressional delegation led by U.S. Senator Richard Shelby and U.S. Robert Aderholt was pushing for a congressional letter to encourage the Committee on the Implementation of Textiles Agreements (CITA) to adopt the call petition on China.

But as October arrived, North Carolina's senators were off the radar screen. Sen. John Edwards was flying around the country promoting the Kerry-Edwards ticket. Sen. Elizabeth Dole, in the meantime, was going from state to state talking to women on behalf of President Bush.

Fifteen of the 24 House members were Republicans who were challenging the position of their House leaders. North Carolina House Democrats Brad Miller, Mel Watts, and Mike McIntyre joined all Republican House members from the state. Republicans in Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, Georgia and Kentucky also signed, as did six Democrats from those states.

The letter was sent to U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick and other Cabinet members, including Commerce Secretary Don Evans, a close confidant of President Bush.

"Consumers deserve to have a stable and healthy domestic sock industry," the House letter asserts. "This highly automated

industry is the most vibrant sector left of our apparel industry... it is a crucial part of the economy and local tax base of communities in North Carolina, Alabama, Virginia, Kentucky, Wisconsin, Iowa, South Carolina, Indiana, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, California and elsewhere," the letter continued.

Washington observers said large multi-national hosiery companies had lobbyists walking the halls of Congress in opposition to the safeguard petition from the hosiery industry. National retailer organizations also opposed it.

The impact of hosiery cutbacks is being felt in Dekalb County, Alabama, home of the Fort Payne manufacturers. Most recent figures put the unemployment rate at 5.6 percent, still lower than the 6.6 percent in the Hickory NC area.

Economic development officials said the climb in the Dekalb jobless rate is due to layoffs at Sara Lee and other hosiery companies. The national unemployment rate in August stood at 5.4 percent.

North Carolina's unique arrangement of bi-party House Speakers reportedly was the talk of a recent convention of House Speakers from across the nation. GOP House Speaker Richard Morgan, at his recent fund-raiser, described a scene where he and Democratic House Speaker Jim Black were standing side-by-side with their name badges identifying them as "North Carolina Speaker of the House."

One delegate from Michigan looked at one badge and then the other. Finally he asked, "Are you both House speakers?"

"You mean you only have one up here?" Speaker Black retorted.

State Capitols are the scenes for two or three fund-raisers each weekday during September and October. Wine, cheese, chicken tenders, egg rolls, and peanuts are spread out for the lobbyists who bring checks starting at \$250.

No free lunch? There is no free party in the pre-election weeks.

A new cycle begins after the elections as candidates attempt to pay off campaign debts. Money does not linger in the HOSEPAC checking account.

The Hosiery Governmental Affairs Council has concluded that outreach to the North Carolina congressional delegation will be included in its mission. The council also is responsible for legislative lobbying in the General Assembly.

The importance of national issues, including open-door access to the U.S. marketplace, has prompted the Council to contact U.S. representatives and senators from the state and monitor issues in the campaigns. The HOSEPAC activity also will involve the congressional delegation.