

Sen. Robert Byrd Changes Mind, Supports Home Rule for District

By Irma Moore

Washington Post Staff Writer

Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), for eight years a symbol to many Washingtonians of congressional power over the District, says he has changed his mind and now favors home rule.

"I just think it's something that shouldn't be denied," Byrd said in an interview, in which he explained his shift as a personal one reached "after some deliberation."

"I think the District ought to be given this opportunity," he said. "It's a responsibility that ought to be placed on them."

The only non-Southern Democrat to vote against the last home rule bill to pass the Senate in 1965, Byrd said he now feels that an elected city government "will have a very beneficial impact on the city ... It will place the responsibility right where it ought to



SEN. ROBERT C. BYRD

... "shouldn't be denied"

and there would be no further passing of the buck to Congress."

Home rule for Washington,

he said, would also "go a long way toward showing the people of the nation and the world that even though this city is predominantly black, the governing of it is not being denied the people because they are black."

Now the No. 2 man in the Senate Democratic leadership, Byrd emphasized that he had no idea what impact his chance of position might have in the Senate, which has passed home rule legislation numerous times, or the House, the traditional burial ground of home rule bills.

"It's not a matter I've discussed with my colleagues, just a conclusion I reached on my own," he said.

Byrd's comments came in the wake of promises by members of both the House and Senate to start the first major home rule drive since 1965 this year.

See BYRD, A7, Col. 3

Byrd Changes Mind, Favors Home Rule for D.C.

BYRD, From A1

The Senate District Committee is expected to act in the next few weeks on several home rule bills now before it. In the House, D.C. Del. Walter E. Fauntroy is trying to rally support for his bill introduced last week.

Once considered a conservative, Byrd is believed to have moved toward the more liberal wing of his party on a number of major policy issues as he has assumed an increasing role in the Democratic leadership of the Senate. He was elected Democratic whip in January.

While he said he has seen "no evidence," of a similar change of sentiment on home rule elsewhere on Capitol Hill, Byrd's comments that home rule would end local criticism of Congress, have also been voiced recently by such staunch opponents of home rule as Rep. Thomas G. Abernethy (D-Miss.).

Tired of Comments

Abernethy, second-ranking Democrat on the House District Committee, last month proposed turning over local taxing powers to the city government because he said he was "sick and tired of people saying Congress won't give us this and Congress won't give us that." He stopped

short of saying he would vote for home rule.

Byrd stepped down in 1969 as chairman of the Senate Appropriations District Subcommittee, the panel that oversees all city spending requests. During his eight years as chairman (longer than any other Senator in this century), he became a powerful—and often controversial—figure in the operation of the city government.

Watched Welfare

Known for his meticulous attention to detail and his grilling of city officials at marathon hearings, Byrd's pursuit of ineligible welfare recipients attracted most of the headlines. At the same time, he was a supporter of a higher federal contribution to the city, and a champion of public schools, playgrounds, swimming pools and libraries.

Seated at the desk in his whip's office in the Capitol recently, Byrd traced how he had arrived at what he called "the development of a viewpoint" in favor of home rule.

"In the years when I was looking at the District so closely, I realized that there was a lack of responsibility at the local government level," he said. He recalled that city officials could come up with unrealistic spending proposals, but Congress had the job of

cutting the budget to meet the revenue.

"The way it is now, they can make mistakes, waste money and if it isn't revealed through careful congressional hearings, it's never disclosed," he said. "I'm not saying city officials aren't responsible people. But under home rule, they'd be directly accountable for the financial management of the city. If they have the responsibility, Congress can no longer be made the whipping boy."

Byrd noted the reasons cited over the years for not giving the city self-government, saying they continue to be legitimate reasons for many "conscientious and sincere individuals who honestly believe it would not be in the best interests of the city."

One of the major arguments, he said, is that the federal interest in what is essentially a federal city must be protected.

"I've come to the conclusion that this can be done, and that's one of the main reasons I've changed my mind," he said. "I'm convinced that with home rule Congress could still exercise the overriding legislative authority."

He said he would support legislation like the current pending bills creating an elected city council and mayor with the power to spend and raise money, but with clear statements that Congress can

still override the local government or pass laws affecting the District.

Byrd added that he would be "less than honest if I said race was not and is not a factor" in attitudes about home rule.

Argument in Favor

"But I've come to the view that this is one main reason why Congress should legislate home rule. This is an argument that could very well be used for home rule, if anyone wanted to face up to the race issue."

There also have been arguments that the city has no financial base, that a home rule government would wind up in the same financial straits as the last elected District government did in 1857. One way to make up for that, Byrd said, is by increasing the federal payment to the city and fixing it at a percentage of what the city collects in taxes.

"By placing the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the people and their representatives, they'd be brought face to face with the revenue problem," he said.

"There would be no more passing of the buck to Congress. The city fathers would have to face up more squarely to the financial problems."

Reminded of a strong speech he made last year in support of the D.C. crime act, Byrd re-

called that the city's crime rate has also been a reason for opposing home rule. "It's been one of mine," he said.

"But the situation isn't improving under the present arrangement, it's continued to get worse despite all the grand statistics being thrown around," he said. "I don't think this is any longer an argument against home rule. Let the city have the full responsibility of governing itself and protecting its citizens."

The 1967 reorganization plan, creating an appointed mayor and city council form of government, "hasn't produced much in the way of beneficial results," he said. The school board, the only elected body in the city, "has done nothing but fight and fuss." He supported the plan to elect the board.

"The elected school board might prove in the long run to be unwise, and so might home rule," he said. "But I think they should be given the opportunity . . . I think it ought to be tried."

"Let's place the responsibility on the city, let it rise or fall on its own."

Would it rise or fall?

"I hope it would not fall . . . There's no question in my mind it can do it if any other city can do it . . . If they need our help, fine."

A supporter of the bill giving the District a nonvoting

delegate in the House, Byrd said he continues to oppose giving the city full voting representation in both House and Senate. His reasons, he said, are constitutional—that the District is not a state and was not intended by the framers of the Constitution to be one.

While the federal city should not elect voting congressmen, he added, "there are lots of benefits that accrue to the District because of its unique nature. Many a city would be happy to change places with the District, with its millions of tourists every year, its federal payment, its beautiful parks and monuments."

We'll Take It

"Put it down in Beckley, W.Va., and we'll take it . . . and give up our Senators," he said with a trace of a smile.

Looking back at the time he expended on the city during his eight years as chairman, Byrd said: "I took a lot of hard knocks . . . But I think I contributed to the welfare of the city."

What he would like to see now, and what he would support, is an elected mayor and city council with full fiscal powers.

Almost as an afterthought, he added:

"I think it will eventually pass the House . . . Maybe the time has come."