

ROLL CALL

Pelosi Calls Steering Meeting to Review Defectors' Votes for CAFTA

By Erin P. Billings

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House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), angry that some of her own betrayed the party on a key trade vote, called a last-minute, Members-only meeting tonight to review the early-morning balloting and the reasoning behind defectors' votes.

Pelosi called for the special session of the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee at a private whip meeting this morning, during which she said she “had a sleepless night” over the Central American Free Trade Agreement vote that narrowly passed early in the morning. Sources in the room said Pelosi was furious at the outcome and the votes of some of the 15 Democrats - notably some in safe districts - who joined the Republicans to pass the bill.

“I’ve never seen her like that,” described one Democratic aide who attended the meeting.

While sources insisted Pelosi has not called for any retribution in the Democratic Caucus, she left open the likelihood that defectors' committee assignments would be reviewed at tonight's meeting of the Steering Committee, which helps determine Members' placement on panels.

“There's going to be a lot of discussion at the meeting, however it's going to focus on a certain group of Members who have no explanation for their votes. That's what it's going to focus on,” said a senior Democratic aide. “There are a handful of members who have explaining to do.”

Another leadership aide said, “there are Members who have questions” about why some of their colleagues voted for the bill, and they want a venue to discuss the outcome. This source said it was unclear whether Members' committee assignments would be in peril.

“There are Members who don't seem to have any sort of reason for voting the way they voted,” this aide said. “While other Members who have tougher districts made the tough decisions.”

Pelosi, according to sources, told Members at the whip meeting that there are “expectations” that come with top committee assignments. She said both privately and publicly that the votes would be reviewed on “a case-by-case basis,” noting that many of the 15 defectors needed to vote for the bill given their districts and political situations. A good share of the 15 are

vulnerable Members facing tough re-elections.

“I think we will have some conversations in our Caucus,” she said at a press conference. “These are 15 different people. Judgments are different for different people.”

Pelosi added: “It’s not about retribution. It’s about managing these votes.”

Sources said many Members and leaders are also concerned about alleged deal-making that ensued leading up to the vote. Pelosi told reporters the House floor turned into an episode of “Let’s Make a Deal” and that for days leading up to the vote Members had “offers made” to them

She even charged that ethics rules may have been broken, and that some Democratic Members who were approached may be considering filing a complaint.

“I think this has to stop, we have to stop this Republican rip off,” Pelosi said. “I find this shameful. I am very unhappy about how things turned out.”

Several Democratic sources said Pelosi and other House leaders are particularly upset with New York Reps. Greg Meeks and Ed Towns, members of exclusive committees with safe seats, who voted for CAFTA.

Meeks insisted he voted for the measure because it was good for the economy and job base of New York as well as Latin America. He said he was lobbied heavily on both sides and offers were flying, but he refused to take any deals.

“Though my heart is with my colleagues and I understand there was a lot at stake, my head told me the right vote, to vote my conscience and vote for the agreement,” Meeks said.

Meeks said he “knows many of my colleagues are disappointed” and expects there will be future discussions with his fellow Members. But he said his colleagues know he is with them “90 percent of the time” and on this particular bill they simply “have a difference of opinion.”

But some Members and aides said the vote might not be that easy to get over.

Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), the Senior Chief Deputy Minority Whip, privately told Members on Thursday morning that he was extremely disappointed in the vote, and made clear that Democratic votes should not be for sale. He said later he thought “some of my friends cast their votes for special interests.

As for the Steering meeting, Lewis said he expected Members to vent their feelings and discuss the outcome.

“We’ve got to talk it out, we’ve got to talk this out,” he said. “In the final outcome, I don’t think people are going to forget what happened. Members who didn’t have to worry about their future and who are in very safe districts didn’t have to vote the way they did.”

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