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Testimony of Jonathan Bydlak
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Before the United States House of Representatives
Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
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By Zoom

Testimony on:
“Working Toward Oversight and Fundamental Reform”

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the U.S. House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you.

I address you today as the head of the Governance Program at the R Street Institute, a right-of-center think tank based in Washington, D.C., as well as the director of R Street’s fiscal and budget policy project. Our organization is dedicated to reforming and improving the way the federal government operates, and passionate about making it more responsive to citizens.

The independence of this body, and the preservation of its identity and functioning, is one of the most important—if not *the* most important—challenge you all face today.

The separation between the branches, a concept enshrined in our founding documents, has eroded over time. Today, action is often expected to originate from farther down Pennsylvania Avenue, with individual members executing the will of the Executive, rather than of the people they represent.

One consequence has been that Congress increasingly struggles to exercise oversight over the Executive, and often fails to claw back the power it has ceded. For example, when Congress yields its tax and spending responsibilities, it leaves an unchecked Executive branch that is more likely to abuse power and squander scarce resources. This is a truth regardless of which party has occupied the White House.

This is just one of the problems that this Select Committee was created to solve.

The value of Congressional oversight cannot be overstated. When Congress does not function, it cannot carry out its own important work and represent constituents—and, it cannot serve as a check on overreach by other branches.

Another important advance made by the Select Committee has been in the area of budget process.

One of the most fundamental actions Congress takes each year—or is supposed to take—is the crafting of a budget; this is the basis for how the government as a whole is intended to operate and a statement of our collective vision for the next year, if not longer.

But the finished product is only part of a budget's value. Arguably more important is the process of thinking about priorities, weighing them against one another, planning for the future and ultimately identifying strategies for improving the lives of your constituents. If these decisions happen in a rushed manner full of gamesmanship and emergencies, when priorities are hammered out by a small group of leadership before being handed to Congress at the last minute, then this benefit is lost.

Moreover, the proper process can provide a foundation for needed discussions when unexpected events occur—something we as a country know all too much about of late.

Sadly, however, this process has been broken and ignored in recent years. We consistently fail to pass individual appropriation bills on time, and increasingly, at all. We frequently risk shutdowns, spend more money than we have, and create planning nightmares for critical programs and agencies like the Department of Defense.

And by failing to craft—and stick to—a realistic governing document for the nation's fiscal future, we impede the ability of Congress to exercise its constitutional prerogative to direct and oversee how the Executive branch spends tax dollars.

There are numerous recommendations made by this committee in the last session of Congress that are critically needed. Many of them center on restoring Article I and helping to make substantive reforms to our largely failed budgetary process.

Restoring congressional rulemaking, strengthening budget enforcement and better reporting on the fiscal health of the nation are all ideas that are critically needed and, we hope, whose time has come.

I encourage you to continue pursuing these ideas, and perhaps most importantly, push hard for their implementation.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to answering any questions the Select Committee may have and to supporting your work in the months ahead.

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