

Dean of the House



AP/Wide World Photos

Michigan Congressman John Dingell is the new chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. At 80 years old, this "Dean of the House" promises to pass legislation that will benefit America's working families.

The Democratic sweep of the House means a profound change in the cast of movers and shakers who control what legislation comes to the floor for a vote or how the House will use its oversight powers. The shift is best symbolized in the new committee chairpersons who are key players in this behind-the-scenes drama, including one of the House's legendary lawmakers, John Dingell of Michigan.

Back at the Helm

The 80 year-old Dingell marks his 51st year in the House with his return as chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, one of the most powerful in Congress. His committee handles as much as 40% of the House's yearly legislative workload and its jurisdiction is broad, from

health care to telecommunications, trade, consumer protection, energy and the environment.

Before the Republican takeover in 1994, Dingell built up a legendary reputation as a chairman who could push through important legislation and as a formidable investigator into waste, fraud and corruption.

"Presidents come and presidents go, but John Dingell goes on forever," quipped former President Bill Clinton. Only one person has ever served longer in the House than Dingell. He first worked as House page in the 1930's, served in World War II and was elected in 1955 to the Michigan House seat held by his father, John Dingell, Sr.

Universal Health Care

John Dingell, Sr. pushed for a universal health care system and his son carries on the fight. "Health care has always been a concern," said Dingell in an interview with Newhouse News Service. "My dad was the first author of national health insurance legislation. I came to Congress determined to defend these programs and move forward to see to it that everybody got health care. Now, almost everyone agrees with me except the insurance companies and the Bush administration."

With Dingell at the helm, the Energy and Commerce Committee already moved, and the full House approved, a bill that allows the federal government to negotiate lower drug prices for seniors which fixes a major flaw in the Republican Medicare Prescription Drug program.

"Middle-class Americans owe a great deal to John Dingell," said IAM President Tom Buffenbarger. "If you enjoy clean air and water, safe consumer products or if you have a parent or grandparent covered by Medicare, you can thank John Dingell. He is a great friend and a great leader in the House of Representatives."