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Hatch Statement at Finance Confirmation Hearing for HHS Secretary

WASHINGTON – Senate Finance Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) today delivered the following opening statement at a hearing to consider the nomination of Rep. Tom Price (R-Ga.) to head the Health and Human Services (HHS) Department:

Today we will consider the nomination of Dr. Tom Price to be the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

I want to welcome Dr. Price to the Finance Committee. I appreciate his willingness to serve in a position of this magnitude, especially at this crucial time.

When Obamacare was pushed through on a series of party-line votes, Republicans in Congress warned that the new health law would harm patients, families, and businesses.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but, we were right. And, the next HHS Secretary will play a pivotal role as we work to repeal Obamacare and replace it with patient-centered reforms that will actually address cost. This will be an important endeavor, one that will and should get a lot of attention here today, but it should not be the sole focus of the next HHS Secretary.

HHS has an annual budget of well over one trillion dollars. Let me repeat that: One department, one trillion dollars.

HHS encompasses the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, and many others. It is no exaggeration to say that HHS touches more of the US economy and affects the daily lives of more Americans than any other part of the US government.

I firmly believe that Dr. Price has the experience and qualifications necessary to effectively lead this large and diverse set of agencies, and many people share that view.

For example, past HHS Secretaries Mike Leavitt and Tommie Thompson strongly support his nomination.

Physician organizations that know Dr. Price's work – including the American Medical Association and most surgical specialty groups – enthusiastically support him. The American Hospital Association and other healthcare stakeholder groups do as well.

Perhaps the Healthcare Leadership Council, representing the broad swath of healthcare providers, said it best in stating that "it is difficult to imagine anyone more capable of serving his nation as the Secretary of HHS than Congressman Tom Price."

Unfortunately, in the current political environment, qualifications, experience, and endorsements from experts and key stakeholders don't seem to matter to some of our colleagues. At least, that appears to be the case as none of those who say they oppose Dr. Price's nomination seem to be talking about whether he is qualified.

Instead, we've heard grossly exaggerated and distorted attacks on his views and his ethics. On top of that, we've heard complaints and a series of unreasonable demands regarding the confirmation process itself.

Of course, these tactics haven't been limited to Dr. Price. My Democratic friends have taken this approach with almost all of President Trump's cabinet nominees as Senate Democrats' unprecedented efforts to delay and derail the confirmation process and apply a radically new set of confirmation standards has continued unabated.

To that point, let me say this: I have been in the Senate for forty years and I think my record for being willing to reach across the aisle is beyond any reasonable dispute. In fact, from time to time, I've taken lumps in some conservative circles for working closely with my Democrat colleagues.

I have, on some occasions, voted against confirming Executive Branch nominees, but far more often than not, I have opted to defer to the occupants of the White House and allow them to choose who serves in their administrations. I've taken some lumps for that too.

I'm not bringing any of this up to brag or to solicit praise from anyone in audience. I raise all of this today so that people can know I'm serious when I say that I am worried about what my colleagues on the minority side are doing to the Senate as an institution. While the overriding sense of comity and courtesy among Senators has admittedly been in decline in recent years, I have never seen this level of partisan rancor when it comes to dealing with a President from an opposing party. I have never seen a party in the Senate – from its leaders on down – publicly commit to not only opposing virtually every nomination, but to attacking and maligning virtually every single nominee.

Let me be clear: I'm not suggesting that the Senate start rubber stamping nominees. Nor am I suggesting that any member of the Senate should vote against their conscience or preferences simply out of respect for tradition or deference. What I am saying is that the same rules, processes, courtesies, and assumptions of good faith that have long been the hallmark of the Senate confirmation process should continue to apply regardless of who is President. If what we're seeing now is the new normal for EVERY time control of the White House changes hands, the Senate, quite frankly, will be a much lesser institution.

Unfortunately, our committee has not been entirely immune to the hyper-politicization of the nomination process. We saw that last week with the Mnuchin hearing, and I regret to say that I think we're likely to see more of it today.

Case in point, I expect that, during today's hearing, we're going to hear quite a bit about process, with claims that Dr. Price's nomination is being rushed and that the nominee hasn't been fully vetted.

This is simply untrue.

President Trump announced his intent to nominate Dr. Price just three weeks after the election. Dr. Price submitted the required tax returns and completed questionnaire on December 21st. That was 35 days ago, and, by any reasonable standard, that is sufficient time for a full and fair examination of the nominee's record and disclosures.

By comparison, the committee held a hearing on the nomination of Secretary Sebelius 16 days after she submitted her paperwork. For Secretary Burwell, it was 17 days. In other words, the time between the completion of Dr. Price's file and his hearing has been more than that of the last two HHS Secretaries COMBINED. And, by the way, both of those nominees received at least a few Republican votes on this committee and on the floor.

Outside of extraordinary process demands, Dr. Price has faced a number of unfair attacks on both his record as a legislator and his finances.

On the questions surrounding finances, I'll defer on any substantive discussion and first allow Dr. Price to defend himself from what are, by and large, specious and distorted attacks. For now, I'll just say that I hope that my colleagues don't invent new standards for finances, ethics, and disclosure that are different from those that have generally applied in the past.

There is a saying involving both stones and glass houses that might be applicable as well.

With regard to Dr. Price's views and voting record, I'll simply say that virtually all the attempts I've witnessed to characterize Dr. Price's views as being "outside of the mainstream" have been absurd, unless, of course, the only ideas that are in the "mainstream" are those that endorse the status quo on healthcare and our entitlement programs.

In conclusion, I just want to note that the overly partisan treatment of nominees and distortions of their records is a relatively new development on this committee. My hope is that we can begin today to reverse recent trends and have a fair and open discussion of the nominee and his qualifications.

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