



# Amid talk on environment, Whitehouse hears Politics War fears

01:00 AM EDT on Monday, April 23, 2007

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Kelli-Lynne Brown, 12, of Warwick, prepares to introduce Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse at the Cranston Senior Center yesterday.

The Providence Journal / Connie Grosch

CRANSTON — On Earth Day, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse told a crowd in Cranston that he and other members of the Senate’s Democratic majority are taking global warming a lot more seriously than their Republican predecessors.

The newly elected Democrat yesterday noted that under the GOP majority, the chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee was Sen. James M. Inhofe, R-Okla., who called the threat of catastrophic global warming the “greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people.”

“Well, you can’t find one in 500 scientists that would agree with that,” Whitehouse said. “There is real consensus that we need to change things.”

Now that Democrats have the majority, “Inhofe is out,” and Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., is in as chairwoman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, Whitehouse said.

Boxer has put forward legislation called the Global Warming Pollution Reduction Act, which Whitehouse is cosponsoring and which he described as “the toughest environmental global-warming climate-change legislation in Washington right now.”

That line drew applause from the 100 or so people who turned out for Whitehouse’s “community dinner” at the Cranston Senior Center last night.

Whitehouse defeated Republican Lincoln D. Chafee in November, running on the theme that a Democratic majority was needed to counter President Bush. And he told the crowd, “One of the things that happened as a result of what you all did in Rhode Island: You changed the balance of power in the Senate, you changed the leadership in the Senate committees.”

After thanking them and talking about global warming, Whitehouse fielded questions from the audience.

A couple of people told him they feared the Bush administration would push the country into a war with Iran. Whitehouse said, “There is no reason whatsoever for us to go to war with Iran. I wouldn’t support it. I think there would be an explosion in Washington — a political explosion — if the president tried to do it.”

He said it was “healthy” that Donald H. Rumsfeld has been replaced as defense secretary with Robert M. Gates. “I don’t think that Gates would carry out an order to precipitate a unilateral attack on Iran without letting other people know,” he said. “God knows what Rumsfeld would have done in those circumstances.”

Whitehouse said Iran has a young population and a strong economy, and he said, “It’s a country that isn’t inherently Islamic. They have a Persian history that dates back thousands and thousands and thousands of years.”

“They don’t need to be our enemy,” Whitehouse said. “What we need to do, I think, is have more dialogue with them.” He called for maintaining “strong economic pressure” over Iran’s nuclear capabilities while at the same time trying to reach out to “calm things down.”

Another audience member said he believed Attorney General Alberto Gonzales had lied about the dismissal of eight U.S. Attorneys. Last week, the Senate Judiciary Committee grilled Gonzales, who denied any political motive for the dismissals.

Whitehouse, a former U.S. Attorney for Rhode Island, accused the Bush administration of “stomping all over” practices and traditions that the Justice Department had established over the course of generations. For example, he said many more White House personnel, including Karl Rove, the president’s chief political strategist, are now allowed to communicate directly with the Justice Department. “If you want an independent Department of Justice, one of the places it has got to be independent from is the White House,” he said.

Former state Rep. Rodney Driver, who ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. House last fall, talked about the Iraq war, asking Whitehouse “why Congress doesn’t do one thing it can do: Cut off the funds.”

Whitehouse said, “You have to say no to the money in the future. I am not going to cut off funds for troops who are now serving in the field.” He said, “That’s what we are fighting over now: Where is the point in the future where you can say that’s the cutoff.”

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