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Frank taking fishing fight to national arena

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The policy rift with the White House over executive decisions that Congressman Barney Frank has described as unjustified, contemptible, weak-willed and destructive to the fishing industry has been pulled into the national political realm.

In no way was it encouraging to the White House to have Frank question policies whose end result, he noted in remarks last Thursday dripping with disdain, were to make the rich richer and the poor poorer.

"How come in a Democratic administration," he asked, "is income distribution so skewed? This is not what Democrats should be proud of."

Yet, he continued, this is what administration policies through the Department of Commerce and its National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have wrought.

If the policies aren't changed, he added, "I have informed the Obama administration that my working relationship with them will suffer."

"Now and through the election," he said, "I can't allow this to stand."

Frank raised the specter of the Obama campaign's progressing without the active participation or blessing — or perhaps even with the passive opposition — of one of the Democratic Party's strongest national brands.

Other than Sarah and Barney, not too many American pols are known and immediately recognized by their first name.

Frank's place in the Democratic firmament has long been taken for granted, the thought of his return to dissidence — to his formative

legislative role in the 1970s on Beacon Hill as a conscience-of-the party back bencher who formed alliances with the tiny Republican contingent and a liberal Republican governor.

Yet the hard-laboring small-businessman, the archetype of Frank's advocacy, was in a sense the core of the 20th century Democratic Party, and is very much now the swing constituency since the 21st century Democratic Party has been captured by global economic forces, central state bureaucracies and environmental forces.

To Frank, these interests seem embarked on a "moral" crusade to dispossess the fishing people and replace their small scale and archaic methods with investor powered global corporations.

This phalanx of environmental theoreticians is epitomized by NOAA chief administrator Jane Lubchenco, a longtime hero of anti-fishing greens and blues forces, a "genius" MacArthur scholar and advocate of science as a political weapon in a pitiless struggle to save the oceans for the fishes.

Frank has said he cannot fathom such policies when the U.S. already imports 80 percent of its seafood, much from nations without conservation values, and the United States conservation effort has made the nation — at least in this one area — a model for the rest of the world.

Fishing votes are few and far flung but they exist in every state along the three coasts, where Obama cleaned up two years ago. Among the 23 "Ocean Nation" states, Obama captured 16, building an electoral collage dominance that gave him 251 of the 270 votes he needed for election, while limiting Republican John McCain to 89.

Frank has announced a final negotiating effort — with the new White House chief of staff, William Daley, who as commerce secretary in the Clinton administration, withstood the greens to let the boats catch more scallops. History upheld his judgment, Frank recalled in New Bedford, citing the last reasonable hope to restore the political alliance.

But losing him seems a distinct possibility based on Frank's own public utterances.

Visibly shaken by what he described as a policy bait-and-switch by U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke — who decided to stand pat in January after giving verbal signals in October that he was prepared, if asked, to take emergency action to relieve a policy-made social and economic crisis in the fishing ports.

Frank apologized to his constituents for his own credulity.

Then he denounced the administration.

"I am infuriated by both the substance and manner in which that was done," he told a gathering of about 100 fishermen and industry representatives for Gloucester, New Bedford and elsewhere, along with emissaries of Gov. Deval Patrick, a friend of Obama dating from career intersection in Illinois.

It was the governor together with Frank who had petitioned the administration for relief. And it was Patrick together with Frank, and Attorney General Martha Coakley who last week sought to join Frank and Congressman John Tierney, Gloucester's congressman, in a federal lawsuit attacking the same policies.

A potentially explosive element in the suit is the request, authored by New Bedford Mayor Scott Lang, that the plaintiffs — including the cities of Gloucester and New Bedford — be allowed to depose federal officials about back channel influences of the ENGOs, the environmental non-government organizations, that have gained influence on fisheries issues since Obama was elected and appointed Lubchenco to head the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Frank addressed this problem too last Thursday in New Bedford.

"The ENGOs didn't have to take over," he said. "They are the same entity."

But he made a promise.

"I am determined, if I do nothing else in this term, I will reverse this," he said.

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