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Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

'Nuclear option' opens gate to more functional government

Pat Perriello | Dec. 2, 2013 NCR Today

The Senate has finally decided to invoke what has been called ?the nuclear option [1].?

This nuclear option actually turns out to be not so nuclear. Essentially, it is a rule change that insures votes on the president?s appointments to judicial and executive positions. The current filibuster process has resulted in the holdup of many of these appointments, or simply preventing their consideration at all. A super majority, or 60 votes, had been required to end a filibuster or to pass any legislation for nearly four decades. Now, these appointments can move forward with a simple majority vote.

A number of politicians have criticized the change, calling it a purely partisan political power grab. While this constitutes pretty impressive alliteration, it is not a power grab at all, but an attempt to move to a more functional government.

For years Americans have voted for divided government that involved a president from one political party and a Congress from a different party. There was a feeling that this would prevent either party from going too far to the right or the left with their agenda. This plan seemed to be somewhat effective because at crunch time the parties would come together and get necessary government business accomplished.

That operational understanding has completely broken down. One party has decided that their agenda is so correct, perhaps even divinely inspired, that no compromise can be tolerated. We have seen the recent government shutdown, and we know that the possibility of a second shutdown is only weeks away.

Therefore, the Senate?s action should actually have taken place earlier. It should also be extended to include legislative issues as well as appointments. In addition, the House of Representatives needs to end the use of the so called ?Hastert [2] Rule [2]? if we can really hope to move beyond dysfunctional government.

The Republicans have been using the Hastert rule to avoid considering legislation unless a majority of Republicans in the House favor it. Even though the entire House would likely approve legislation such as immigration reform, the leadership refuses to bring any such legislation to a vote.

While I strongly believe in our system of checks and balances, I don?t believe that means that a small minority should be in charge of running the government. The minority is of course entitled to certain important rights, but these rights should not include the ability to prevent any legislation from proceeding even when it is supported by a majority of the Congress and the American people.

I began talking about a need to move to a parliamentary form of government some time ago [3]. Rule changes like the one adopted by the Senate could make that unnecessary.

A realization by members of Congress that they are called to Washington to make government work and not to destroy it would also be helpful. Gerrymandering of congressional districts needs to end as well. Independent commissions in each state need to be set up to redraw congressional districts not based on political

considerations. Changes need to be made to the operation of our government, because dysfunctional government needs to end.

Opponents of the new Senate rule point out that if the tables were turned and Republicans were to win back the Senate, they would run rough shod over a Democratic minority. If Republicans win back the presidency and the Senate in 2016 I will not be happy. Yet, whoever is elected has a right to implement their program. Unless that happens we will never know whether the program would be effective or not.

That?s essentially the purpose of elections. If we don?t like the results we can vote in a new government. That is one advantage of a parliamentary system.

The new rule will not end the troubles in our government. Many challenges remain. There still appears to be little interest in moving forward with the needs of the nation. Too many uncertainties remain, including budget negotiations, immigration reform, sensible gun legislation, etc.

But the Senate has taken a step in the right direction. After five years in office, this president may finally be able to get his entire administrative team in place.

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