

Senator questions nominees' suitability

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WASHINGTON - The nominations of two St. Petersburg men to be U.S. ambassadors were put on hold Tuesday by a Maryland senator who complained the posts were merely rewards for their contributions to President Bush.

The nominations of Joseph Zappala, whom Bush wants to send to Spain, and Mel Sembler, who is supposed to go to Australia, will likely be stalled in the Senate until at least next month because of objections by Sen. Paul Sarbanes, a Maryland Democrat.

At a meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday, Sarbanes questioned whether Sembler, Zappala and two other Bush nominees had any qualifications other than their political connections. Sembler and Zappala together contributed \$253,000 to Bush's Republican presidential candidacy last year, and they also led efforts to raise money from other givers.

The two men are developers with no foreign policy experience.

"If it's going to become a bidding war, we probably ought to pass a law and put the posts up for public bid so at least the money went to the U.S. Treasury," Sarbanes said.

"How are we going to convince the people of foreign countries that we're serious about our countries' objectives if we are obviously treating the ambassadorial post in that country as simply a reward for large political contributions?"

It is unclear whether Sarbanes' objections reflect deeper opposition in the committee, which has the job of reviewing the nominees, deciding whether they are suitable and then sending the approved choices on to the Senate for confirmation. The senator said he is blocking the confirmation by the committee so other committee members may read the nominees' qualification forms.

This is the second round of controversy faced by Zappala. Earlier this month, committee members questioned him about his ties to a controversial drug treatment center, Straight Inc., that he helped found, and about a loan he got at favorable rates from a bank where he sits on an advisory board.

Zappala apparently answered those questions to the satisfaction of the committee, and it appeared both he and Sembler were headed toward confirmation when the new controversy arose. The two men did not attend the hearing Tuesday and did not return phone calls made to their homes.

During the hearing, several Republican senators defended the nominees. They lauded the work by Sembler and Zappala at Straight Inc. and said the men had contributed to their community.

The Republicans also suggested that Sarbanes was playing politics. "You'll probably get patted on the back by every liberal editor in the country," Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., told him.

Florida Sen. Connie Mack, normally affable during such controversies, appeared perturbed at Sarbanes' comments. After the meeting, Mack said: "He's taken a slap at the president, and he's making it that much more difficult to encourage people to become active in their government."

"The message is that if you're successful, there may not be a place for you in the federal government," said Mack, a Republican.

That's not how Sarbanes and some other committee members saw it.

In a long statement, Sarbanes acknowledged that other presidents had picked big money givers to become ambassadors. But normally, he said, the nominees had other dimensions and qualities they brought to the job. He said the law says that nominees' political contributions should not be a factor in the confirmation.

Bush's choices, Sarbanes said, had fallen short of these standards: ``I'm struck by the number that are coming through. It's one thing to on occasion have to hold your nose and let a nomination go through. . . .``

He also read from the forms filled out by Zappala and Sembler, listing the campaign contribution totals and noting that passages in both forms were almost the same. Both nominees' forms said they were ``coalition builders`` who could ``organize my colleagues,`` according to Sarbanes.

While they weren't nearly as critical, other committee members agreed that more career foreign services experts should be picked to represent the United States overseas.

Compared with other countries, said committee chairman Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., the United States has a high percentage of non-professionals who are ambassadors.

``We're a joke, I think, to many nations around the world,`` Pell said.

Along with Sembler and Zappala, Sarbanes said he is blocking Bush's nomination of Della Newman to be ambassador to New Zealand and Western Samoa. Newman is a real estate broker who led Bush's presidential campaign in the state of Washington.

His objections to a fourth nomination - C. Howard Wilkins Jr. to go to the Netherlands - were withdrawn when a committee member pointed out that a delay would mean the United States would be without an ambassador when Bush travels there this summer.

Several other nominees also were approved by the committee Tuesday.

While Sarbanes asked that a vote on the confirmations be put on hold for a week, the delay will probably be longer. The Senate will be in recess until July 10, though Sarbanes held out the slight chance that he will allow the committee to consider the nominees later this week.

[Illustration]

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, (2); Caption: Joseph Zappala; Mel Sembler

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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