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Johnson explains his vote for Sensenbrenner's USA Freedom Act

U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson tells WisPolitics he voted for the USA Freedom Act because he "recognized reality," despite his belief that limiting NSA monitoring of citizens' telephone calls "is hampering our ability to do effective intelligence gathering."

The House bill, co-authored by U.S. Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner, R-Menomonee Falls, received 57 votes late last week, three votes shy of what was needed to advance the legislation after it had already cleared the House. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., favors a re-authorization of the full Patriot Act, leaving the Senate in a last-minute scramble as some provisions in the law are set to expire.

Johnson said "it's a shame the way this debate's gone," but added "because of mischaracterizations, if the public opinion wants that program shut down, it will be."

Johnson said he hopes to vote for a future bill that "gives us more transition time" to make sure the U.S. government can do "queries" to get information to "shut down some very real plots." He called members of the NSA "true patriots" who defend Americans' freedom in a similar way as the military.

Johnson spoke with WisPolitics.com after addressing members of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, where he minced no words on matters ranging from Cuba to regulatory relief.

Johnson described the need to streamline the process for large construction projects to obtain permits and overcome environmental hurdles part of an overall fight against laws that hamper economic growth.

He lamented what he called a "cultural attitude" that "government is good and business is bad," giving as an example the animated "LEGO" movie, in which the villain is called "Lord Business."

"That's done for a reason," Johnson said. "They're starting that propaganda, and it's insidious."

Johnson told MMAC members that some projects take up to eight years to overcome environmental concerns and achieve permits. Some pending legislation seeks to cut that timeframe to two years or less.

Johnson said he and other supporters are seeking stories from business leaders who want fewer layers of regulatory hoops.

"We actually had the chancellor of the UW-Madison come to our office a few months ago to ask for regulatory relief from the U.S. government," Johnson said. "Happy to help her, I told her, 'Welcome to the party.'"

Johnson had praise for President Obama, however, when members of the audience questioned Johnson's support for the Trade Promotion Authority bill.

"This is our only chance," said Johnson. "If we had not done this, trust me, under a Republican president, we would not get trade promotion authority. The only reason we're getting this is President Obama was willing to fight for it and we got enough Democratic support in the Senate to pass it."

Johnson called for heads to roll at the Tomah VA hospital.

"You've got to fire bad people," he said. "If you've got bad actors who continue to do harm and they're not fired, it sends a really bad signal within an organization. We're trying to give the VA the authority to do that, whether they want to or not."

Asked about Cuba, Johnson repeated his assertion that Obama overstepped his authority by re-establishing trade with the country. Johnson said he admitted that 50 years of embargoes did not resolve prior conflicts but said the U.S. ought to "ratchet up sanctions" against Cuba, just as it should with Iran.

Asked about how to stem illegal immigration, Johnson called border security "a big old mess, a witch's stew" and blamed poor border control on "our insatiable demand for drugs."

Johnson said that of the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., "8.1 million are working -- and working hard." Johnson called for making those individuals legal "guest workers," adding that "We will not get Americans to fill those positions, there's no way, because we tell all of our kids to get a four-year degree."

-- By Kay Nolan
For WisPolitics.com