

The District's Newest Overseer

Tuesday, July 17, 2001; Page A16

MAYBE IT'S the gavel or, perhaps it's the headiness that comes with the title "chairman." Possibly it's bad advice from power-hungry staff with too much time on their hands. Whatever the reasons, something seems to come over otherwise reasonable lawmakers when they assume the leadership of a congressional panel with oversight responsibilities for the District of Columbia. The latest example of that phenomenon is Louisiana Sen. Mary Landrieu. No sooner had the freshman Democrat taken over the chairmanship of the Appropriations subcommittee on the District than she proceeded to unilaterally undo a city-sponsored and House-approved plan to manage District finances when the control board goes dormant after Sept. 30.

Ironically, Sen. Landrieu launched her monkey wrench -- in the form of a proposed rider to the 2001 supplemental appropriations bill -- about the time she was telling a group of Washington Post editors and reporters that she would do her best to avoid a repeat of the rider-attachment exercises that have plagued previous D.C. budget bills. Her proposal also came on the heels of a warm and fuzzy public hearing that left D.C. officials believing they had, in Mary Landrieu, a Senate friend for life. Today Mayor Anthony Williams, D.C. Council Chairman Linda Cropp and Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton are in a royal snit, brought on by the senator's out-of-the-blue plan to change the powers of the city's already powerful chief financial officer.

District officials were under the illusion that their plan would reassure Congress that the city's finances would be well handled when the control board left the scene. Their plan, approved by the financial control board, sets a five-year term for the chief financial officer, who would be appointed by the mayor but would be removable only with concurrence of two-thirds of the council. The plan also gives the finance chief power to hire and fire top financial heads of city agencies, manage the city budget office and install deputies in city departments. Del. Norton and others said this transfer of power to an appointed finance chief is an unprecedented step for a locally elected government to take. The House liked it, too. But it wasn't good enough for Sen. Landrieu.

She's asked a House-Senate conference to give the finance chief a longer term, subpoena powers and total control over a \$68 million budget, 1,000 employees and contracts -- with no accountability to the mayor, council or District voters. The senator couldn't mandate that anti-local government arrangement in New Orleans, Shreveport or Baton Rouge. Nor would she dare try. But this is the District, she's the chairman -- and guess who thinks she's got the whip hand?

© 2001 The Washington Post Company