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Pandora Opens A Can of Worms

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WASHINGTON—An out-of-town reader of The Congressional Record would have to conclude that the Capitol Building is a strange place, judging by the way its inhabitants talk.

The rugs must be lumpy because something is always being swept under them.

Apparently there's a tent pitched in the Senate chamber, because a camel is always threatening to stick his nose under it.

There must be a henhouse to accommodate the chickens coming home to roost, plus a poke for pigs and a can for worms.

In the middle of the House chamber there's obviously a big Pandora's box which, despite all the warnings, somebody is forever opening.

Cliches and hackneyed expressions are the mortar of congressional speech. The middle-aged men who make their living with words feel the need, under the pressures of extemporaneous debate, to use combinations of words they've heard before and are comfortable with. So hoaxes are always "cruel," an inadequate proposition is always "woefully inadequate" and whatever a "little guy" pays, he pays "through the nose."

Some people are collectors of Capitol Hill cliches. One such connoisseur is John Pastore of Rhode Island, who as a Senator for 23 years has heard them all. He prides himself on being able to reel off dazzling clusters of bromides in his own speeches, as in this heroic combination on the Senate floor:

"I say today, let us not throw out the baby with the bath water, let us not lose sight of the forest for the trees, let us not trade off the orchard for an apple."

Sen. Pastore used the most common form of the baby and the bath water cliché, but others sometimes employ original variations.

Sen. Mike Gravel of Alaska: "It seems that many times when we want to change the water, we wind up throwing out the baby."

Rep. Frank Denholm of South Dakota: "I do not agree with those here or elsewhere that favor throwing out the baby because of dirty water."

Tiresome cliches can be enriched somewhat by mixing them inventively. A memorable mixture came from the late George Andrews of Alabama one day during a House debate on busing. Addressing members from the North, Mr. Andrews shouted: "Now the chickens are coming home to roost and the monkey is on your back."

Most people know that members of Congress talk funny, using institutional word patterns all their own. The able Senator from Texas must address the distinguished Senator from Nevada in a stylized cadence heard nowhere else. In the other body, the gentlewoman from California must first ask the gentleman from New York to yield before asking him a question. He begins: "In reply to the gentlewoman..." She says: "I thank my able friend."

Within this framework of legislative patois, the members are always reaching for the memorable phrase, the striking analogy, that may help win an argument. Often the effort fizzles into well-worn exhortations about geese and golden eggs or putting a Band-Aid on a cancer. But sometimes the debaters actually come up with an arresting way of making a point.

This year's House debate over opening the Highway Trust Fund for mass transit produced a couple of novel observations from members who argued that the fund is too small for both roads and subways. "You can't make two quarts of gin in a one-quart jar," said Rep. William Harsha of Ohio. "They are throwing one bone to two dogs and trying to make us fight over it," said Rep. Jim Wright of Texas.

And even when a debater can only think of a cliché, he might be able to use the cliché itself to make his point. Somebody in the House was offering the proposition that all citizens should have a statutory right of access to public beaches. Rep. Charles Mosher of Ohio had all kinds of objections to that. It would be too hard, he said, for government agencies to write regulations based on that statute, and he added triumphantly:

"It seems to me this is a terrific can of worms. And speaking of worms, what regulations would we have about fishermen as opposed to bathers on these beaches?"

Even before his Watergate fame, Sen. Sam Ervin of North Carolina was known around the Senate as a clever wordsmith. In a debate on the Senate Post Office Committee's jurisdiction over a voter registration bill, Sen. Ervin broke up his colleagues with the following:

"With all due deference to everybody, I say facetiously, but I also say it seriously while I say it facetiously, that they gave the parliamentarian a wolf dressed up in sheep's clothing, and on that basis he sent this bill to a committee that has no more jurisdiction in the field of elections than I have to select lingerie for the Queen of Sheba."

Another time Sen. Ervin was praising a fellow Senator's ability to penetrate a complex legal issue, or to "unscrew the inscrutable." No slip of the tongue, the expression actually was borrowed from Seth B. Nicholson, an astronomer who died in 1963.

Lawmakers occasionally use down-home localisms to make a point, but the result can be bafflement. Rep. Jack Edwards of Alabama chose this way to emphasize how much he opposes U.S. aid to North Vietnam: "All the fish in the Gulf of Mexico could be caught and cooked from one big jubilee and my position would still not change." In Mobile Bay, it seems, big schools of fish from time to time swarm shoreward in what's known locally as a jubilee.

Congressional prose tends toward the stuffy side, but now and then someone will attempt comedy. Rep. Silvio Conte of Massachusetts is a severe critic of federal compensation payments to beekeepers whose bees are killed by pesticides, and he worded an attack this way:

"This federal giveaway should really send my colleagues off buzzing, if it does not make them break out in hives."

My waxing rhetorically would be very funny if it were not for the taxpayers who are getting stung. If Congress were to continue this program, it would lay itself bare to the stinging indictment of taxpayers that it has, may I say, bees in its bonnet."

A snappy saying is about all today's lawmakers ever try for. With the death of Everett Dirksen, elegant oratory isn't heard in the Senate any more. Democratic Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana thinks the reason is that Senators just don't have the time to put a high polish on their rhetoric. Whatever the reason, the result is an addiction to what's been said before, and it accounts for the sound of all those apprehensive babies sloshing around in their bathwater.