In Praise of the Fairness Doctrine

The Business of Public Trust

Pat Aufderheide

It looks like the Fairness Doctrine, that mild-mannered requirement that broadcasters provide time for “conflicting views on issues of public importance,” is making a comeback. And along with it is returning the notion of broadcasters’ public interest obligations.

Legislation affirming the Fairness Doctrine—in identical bills introduced by Senator Ernest Hollings (Democrat, South Carolina) and Representative John Dingel (Democrat, Michigan)—is marching swiftly through Congress. Both bills have breathtakingly bipartisan support. When the Senate bill passed in April, by a 2-to-1 margin, both Jesse Helms and Howard Metzenbaum voted yes. In the House, where the bill is scheduled to come to the floor today (June 3), its co-sponsors include conservative Newt Gingrich and liberal Ted Weiss, along with dozens of others.

That spectrum reflects a consensus, particularly loud at the fringes of this consensus society, that on-air discussion of ideas can’t be left to the marketplace alone. Phyllis Schlafly and Ralph Nader shared a panel and, for a change, an opinion, when they supported the Doctrine in House hearings. Endorsers also include the National Rifle Association and the Sierra Club, the AFL-CIO and General Motors. And the American Civil Liberties Union backs it strongly.

Congress might never have acted without six years of contempt for the concept of public trusteeship by Mark Fowler, who stepped down as head of the Federal

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Pat Auferheide is the Washington, D.C., field representative of the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ, which supports this legislation.

The Fairness Doctrine puts the burden of channel equity standards on broadcasters, not on Congress. The FCC has not been able to determine how to implement the Fairness Doctrine.

The Fairness Doctrine is a relic of the past. It is not designed to serve the public interest today. It is time for us to move forward with modern regulations that serve the needs of our society.

As we move into the new century, we must ensure that our telecommunications policies reflect the values of our diverse and dynamic society. The Fairness Doctrine does not do this. It is outdated and ineffective.

We therefore urge you to consider the need for modern, effective regulations in the telecommunications field.