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Who's Listening? (Hint: It's not the GOP)

North Carolina congressman David Price calls out the GOP on ignoring their constituents.



David Price (D-NC) takes questions from District 4 constituents. (Photo: DPSnyder)

More than two hundred people filed into the Orange County Social Services building in Hillsborough, North Carolina, last Saturday building for a chance to talk with David Price, the Democratic congressman representing North Carolina's fourth district. Price's staff had originally planned the listening session to be at the Orange County Public Library, then moved it to the OCSS building to accommodate an avalanche of RSVPs. The mood was festive and noisy, with chattering neighbors comparing notes and embracing each other. The crowd was decidedly progressive.

Congressman Price took time to speak to the overflow crowd outside, and then entered the packed auditorium to give an update from Washington and engage vigorously and at length with his constituency. He said he's frustrated with the ongoing budget gridlock that has made it impossible to find funding sources for the infrastructure projects that would create jobs outside of the urban centers of our state. The culture of "no" which has prevailed since Republicans in Washington took Grover Nordquist's "pledge" in 2012, he said, has hindered economic development in North Carolina, and further deepened political and economic divisions. Price spoke with feeling about town halls in the days before radical gerrymandering, when he had to physically separate folks during heated arguments. "Now that was healthy," he said. "That was real Democracy!"

While Democratic congressmen like Price are speaking to record numbers, both citizens and the press are being shut out by the new Republican majority in North Carolina—and around the nation. The vigorous resistance of citizens to the executive orders and cabinet appointments of the new administration have GOP senators and representative in full retreat: "They're cancelling meetings with constituents all over the country," Price said, likely because they are intimidated by the probability of confronting large crowds of demonstrators.

In North Carolina, this is certainly so. Senator Richard Burr (R-NC) famously said that town halls with his constituency "don't work for him." Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC) recently made a 15-minute cameo appearance at a listening session that was scheduled to last an hour, and even banned *The News & Observer* from receiving event information about his campaign until it demonstrated that it would cover it "from a balanced point of view."

Congressman Price took questions from his constituents for two hours and fifteen minutes.

Several people wanted to know what the Democrats are doing to call out Trump and his administration on his personal conflicts of interest, those of his cabinet, the President's failure to release his taxes, and his appointment of family members to White House posts. Congressman Price assured us that vigorous investigations into these matters as well as into Russian involvement in the election are under way, and he asked us to be patient for the results of those investigations.

Citizens have flooded the offices of Burr and Tillis with messages protesting the President's cabinet appointments and Muslim ban, but response has been nil. In North Carolina, the senators' refusal to meet with voters echoes former Republican Governor Pat McCrory's refusal to meet with Moral Monday protesters in Raleigh, or even with 12-year-old Madison Kimrey who promoted a public petition to see the Governor about H589, legislation signed by McCrory that eliminated voter pre-registration in high schools. State Senator Dan Bishop has threatened to introduce legislation in the coming session that would have a chilling effect on protest in Raleigh and beyond, making face to face protest with current and past office holders equal to intimidation, carrying possible jail sentences of up to five years.

Can the GOP of North Carolina ignore us forever?

One woman said to Price that the deep divisions in American society are reflected in the social divisions we feel here in Hillsborough, and, indeed, even within families. She asked Price whether he was more in favor of a trying to find common ground or of adopting the approach of resistance and responding with "no" as Republicans did for the entire Obama presidency. Congressman Price said that in all his many years in Washington, he has never seen an administration fail so completely to demonstrate any willingness to work with the other side as the Trump administration has in its first few weeks in office.

"Given the current atmosphere," Price said, "obstructionism is going to be necessary, until this Administration gets the message and starts extending gestures of conciliation."

Price said that the this approach will be adopted by Congressional Democrats with regard to cabinet nominations, and in particular with regard to the nomination of Judge Gorsuch to the Supreme Court. Price emphasized that blocking the nomination of Mick Mulvaney to the office of Budget Director is a particularly important battle. (Mulvaney is known as an advocate for Nordquist-style financial conservatism, and was recently found to have avoided paying payroll taxes for a personal employee.)

Two attendees asked about referenced the Dakota Access Pipeline, protesting the administration's retraction of the Obama administration's decision on the matter. They spoke of environmental concerns, but also emphasized a history of broken promises to Native Americans and a sense of disgust that Washington should again break its promise to these nations. Price said that, though the current administration has been aggressive thus far, the fight has only just begun on DAPL and other matters, including the opening up of three million acres of parkland to corporate exploitation and rollbacks of environmental regulation.

When I took the mic, I asked Congressman Price whether or not he was aware that the gag order against federal agencies had led them to establish rogue social media accounts, and that the EPA in particular had reached out to extra-governmental organizations with the aim of protecting climate change data and their mission to communicate with the public. Congressman Price took notes, while assuring us that the Obama administration had taken careful steps to protect such data in the period directly following the election and prior to the inauguration, something I didn't know before. Clearly, efforts have been made to Trump-proof these agencies as much as possible. Nevertheless, Trump's first and perhaps most dangerous walls are those being erected between the people and their government.

I called the White House switchboard on his first day in office and the comments line had been closed. By contrast, everyone who came to Congressman Price's event was able to speak with him directly, and he showed remarkable stamina and understanding of our anger and concerns. He reminded us that while petitions and social media are useful tools, there is no substitute for showing up in person at a representative's office, at home or in Washington, and presenting our views directly.

But how? These days, sightings of Republican legislators in North Carolina are as rare as reports of Big Foot.

Where will you be next Tuesday? Want to get involved? Get connected. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter, and we'll see you out there for #ResistTrumpTuesdays.