The Freedom Caucus Believed in the Myth of Its Own Power

**By Brendan Buck**

On Saturday the House of Representatives approved the most consequential legislation of this Congress, a foreign aid package for American allies. More Democrats than Republicans voted in favor of the measure that allowed the package to pass. And once again the speaker’s job is at risk.

This is just the latest example of how this House of Representatives has become unmoored from the normal practices of a body that has long relied on party unity to function. The speaker, Mike Johnson, holds his role only because aa few hardline Republicans ousted the previous speaker for being too dismissive of the demands. But since the moment they threw their support behind Mr. Johnson, these hard-liners have encountered the reality that they’re irrelevant to the governance of the House of Representatives.

For all its rank partisanship, the House right now is functionally and uneasily governed by a group of Republicans and Democrats. The House is led by a conservative speaker, but for any matter of lawmaking, he cannot count on a Republican majority. Instead, a collation has emerged that is willing to do what is necessary to save the House from itself. But still, we must wonder how long a GOP speaker can sustain a position he owes to Democrats. It is no small thing for any speaker to rely on the opposition party to govern.

In the past year, the House has averted a catastrophic debt default, passed foreign military aid when it seemed hopeless and funded the government when a shutdown seemed all but inevitable. Should we expect more from Congress? Of course. But the critical items are getting done in a more bipartisan manner than would seem possible in this era of negative partisanship.

The most conservative voices are getting shut out, and the House Freedom Caucus, ironically, has made sure of it. The sustainability of it all will be decided by whether Mr. Johnson continues down the path of realistic policymaking or feels the urge to now appease the discontents who have worked to stymie him from the start.

To understand how broken down the normal power structures have become – and how, in the process, the hard-liners have removed themselves from lawmaking – consider the basic procedures with which the business of the House is done.

The job of the Rules committee, often referred to as the speaker’s committee, is to bring the agenda of the majority to the floor and set terms of debate on legislation. It is not a high-profile panel, but its work is critical to the operation of the House. It has long been the responsibility of the majority party to carry the votes on the agenda-setting rules. One of the few things stressed to new members of the House is to never vote against their party on a rule.

Members of the Freedom Caucus, however, now see themselves a watchmen of the floor. They set conservative policy demands that are impossible to achieve with Democrats controlling the Senate and the White House. And when these demands are inevitability not met, they routinely hijack the process to stop legislation before it can even get an up-or-down vote, not matter if a measure has the overwhelming support of the Republican conference or the House.

Seven times in the past year an effort to bring a bill up floor a vote through the rules process has failed, primarily defeated by conservatives. Before this Congress, it had been more than two decades since a rule had been voted down. A party unable to bring its agenda to the floor for a vote is no longer a functional majority.

But the business of the House must go on somehow, and Mr. Johnson has been forced to go around the blockages. When he reached a bipartisan agreement for funding the government this year, he took the extraordinary step of considering the bill under fast-track procedures that limit floor debate, bar amendments and require a two-thirds vote for passage. This process, typically reserved for controversial measures, is how we’re funding the entire government.

Another procedural abnormality was necessary for last week’s foreign aid package. Despite it being obvious that the House overwhelmingly supports aid for Ukraine, the Freedom Caucus vowed to block consideration of the bill. Democrats were forced to carry the rule teeing up the vote, providing more votes than republicans.

As a result, Mr. Johnson now waits for Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, the anti-Ukraine Freedom Caucus member from Georgia, to follow through on threats to force a vote to remove him from the speakership. She claims it is he who has betrayed Republicans, not the conservatives who continually undermine their own colleagues.

Some Democrats have expressed at least an openness to helping Mr. Johnson retain his speakership if it is threatened for doing what they viewed as the right thing in passing Ukraine assistance. An overwhelming bipartisan repudiation of Ms. Greene’s speaker-removal tactic would be the single bet thing the House could do to regain its credibility as a deliberative body.

The Freedom Caucus’s power terms from its willingness to take out the speaker. When the threat tool is removed, its threats quickly become more bark than bite.

The potential for a bipartisan rejection of the effort to out Mr. Johnson has spawned hope for a new era of comity in the House. But this is not fairy-tale politics. There will be no sweeping compromise on immigration or the federal deficit.

A collation works only so long as both sides are getting something from the deal. Mr. Johnson’s survival as speaker for the remainder of this Congress is aided by the fact there is very that the Jouse must do before the elections. But he will no doubt feel extraordinary pressure to take actions to get backing the good graces of conservatives.

Kevin McCarthy, the previous speaker, lost his job because Democrats ha lost faith in him as an honest broker. Mr. Johnson is not immune from a similar erosion of trust. It could happen if he were to abandon the spending agreement put in place last year by President Biden and Mr. McCarthy. He similarly may not be able to count on Democrats again if he tries o impeach the president.

The speakership seems to have given Mr. Johnson, who himself rose to the job from the ranks of the discontented conservatives, a new perspective on the hard-liners, who simply cannot be counted on. And the past week has demonstrated that governance is still possible in the House if, as the speaker said last week, you “do the right thing.”

Whether it’s Mr. Johnson or Mr. McCarthy or the two previous Republican speakers for whom worked, it has not been the Republican speakers for whom I worked, it has not been the Republican leadership that cut out the Freedom Caucus. The Freedom Caucus, by believing in the myth of its own power, made itself irrelevant to legislative outcomes.