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If Only Laws Were Like Sausages

By **ROBERT PEAR**

LANDOVER, Md. — In defending their work, members of Congress love to repeat a quotation attributed to Otto von Bismarck: “If you like laws and sausages, you should never watch either one being made.”

In other words, the legislative process, though messy and sometimes unappetizing, can produce healthy, wholesome results.

But a visit to a sausage factory here, about 10 miles from the Capitol, suggests that Bismarck and today’s politicians are mistaken. In many ways, that quotation is offensive to sausage makers; their process is better controlled and more predictable.

“I’m so insulted when people say that lawmaking is like sausage making,” said Stanley A. Feder, president of [Simply Sausage](#), whose plant here turns out 60,000 pounds of links a year.

“With legislation, you can have hundreds of cooks — members of Congress, lobbyists, federal agency officials, state officials,” Mr. Feder said. “In sausage making, you generally have one person, the wurstmeister, who runs the business and makes the decisions.”

Sausages are produced according to a recipe. And while plenty of pork goes into many sausages and laws, the ingredients of the edible product are specified in advance, carefully measured out and accurately identified on a label. An inspector from the United States Department of Agriculture visits the plant every day.

At Simply Sausage, the bones and other inedible, indigestible, unsavory parts are dumped in a big garbage pail and discarded. On Capitol Hill, stale old ideas are recycled year after year.

Granted, Simply Sausage is a small, artisanal sausage maker, not an industrial-scale slaughterhouse. But the comparison is still faulty, said Mr. Feder, a political scientist who took up sausage making after retiring from the Central Intelligence Agency.

“We make one type of sausage at a time,” he said. “We make them serially — bratwurst, kielbasa, spicy Italian. Congress, by contrast, often lumps bills together and tacks on unrelated amendments.”

Indeed, Representative [Mike Pence](#) of Indiana, the No. 3 House Republican, complained recently that Congress was passing laws “so monstrously overcomplicated that no human being could read through them in a lifetime, much less understand them.”

Republicans promise changes after they take control of the House in January. In their campaign manifesto, “A Pledge to America,” they said they would publish the text of every bill online at least three days before the House votes. They promised that every bill would “include a clause citing the specific constitutional authority” for it.

And they vowed to “end the practice of packaging unpopular bills with ‘must pass’ legislation to circumvent the will of the American people.” Instead, they said, “we will advance major legislation one issue at a time.”

Republican and Democratic leaders have endorsed similar ideas in the past, but often decided, in practice, that achieving their political objectives was more important than observing the niceties of parliamentary procedure.

Alan Rosenthal, a professor of public policy at Rutgers University and a former director of its Eagleton Institute of Politics, said the sausage metaphor was less apt than ever.

“In a real sausage plant,” Professor Rosenthal said, “everybody is on the same team, trying to produce bratwurst or knockwurst. In the legislative sausage factory, at least half the people don’t want to make sausage. Or they want to make a different kind. For the last few years, Republicans have said, ‘We won’t make sausage unless we control the recipe.’ ”

Big bills often include special-interest provisions whose origin is a mystery. By contrast, Mr. Feder knows exactly where his ingredients come from. He has visited the family farms in Oskaloosa, Iowa, that supply his pork.

Mr. Feder’s recipe for loukaniko Greek sausage specifies the contents: 90 pounds of Duroc pork, 537 grams of garlic, 258 grams of orange zest, 752 grams of Spanish sea salt and 859 grams of red wine.

After the meat is sliced, ground up and mixed with spices and seasonings — but before it is stuffed into casings — Mr. Feder heats up three samples from each batch and tastes them.

“That’s called quality control,” Mr. Feder said.

The output of a sausage factory is remarkably uniform. The stuffing machine ejects dozens of sausage links, strung together, each looking just like the others.

“Sausage making strives for uniformity,” Professor Rosenthal said. “In the legislative process, uniformity is virtually unheard of.”

Consider the new health care law. It is full of anomalies. The last 141 pages of the bill amend and repeal provisions scattered through the first 763 pages. In a separate bill signed by [President Obama](#) seven days later, Congress revised many provisions of the first bill.

Unsurprisingly, during the Congressional debate, there were many references to sausages. Senator [John McCain](#), Republican of Arizona, implored colleagues to “stop this unsavory sausage-making

process called **health care reform**, where special favors are dispensed to special people for special reasons in order to purchase votes.”

The legislative meat grinder turns out many strange products.

In 2009, for example, as part of a giant spending bill, Congress allowed Amtrak passengers to carry unloaded guns in luggage. The bill stipulated that ammunition must be packed in secure wood or metal boxes. By mistake, it said that passengers should also be stowed in such containers. Congress corrected the error seven months later.

Congress also neglected to fill in the blanks in a bill providing \$26 billion of aid to states and school districts. The bill, as signed by the president in August, says, “This Act may be cited as the ‘XXXXXXXX Act of XXXX.’ ”

The list goes on. Next year, the House side of the sausage factory opens under new management. But chances are sausage makers will still feel insulted.