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Bankruptcy Bill, Caught in Abortion Dispute, Dies in Congress

By PHILIP SHENON

WASHINGTON, Nov. 15 — With a long-stalled bill to toughen bankruptcy laws declared dead today in Congress because of abortion politics, Senate Democrats and House Republicans were left to blame each other for the collapse of a measure that otherwise had broad bipartisan support and was championed by powerful corporate lobbyists.

The Senate Democratic leader, Tom Daschle of South Dakota, said he would not bother to schedule a vote on a stripped-down version of the bill that the House passed minutes before it adjourned today and that did not include a provision on abortion rights.

The overall bill, sought for years by credit-card companies, banks and retailers, was intended to make it harder for people to escape debts in bankruptcy court.

The abortion provision was a result of arduous negotiations last summer between leaders of both houses. It was drafted at the insistence of Senate Democrats to restrict what they described as abuses of the system by anti-abortion demonstrators, who they said were filing for bankruptcy to avoid paying court judgments resulting from violent protests.

"House Republicans killed bankruptcy for this year," Mr. Daschle told reporters. "It's as simple as that."

With the Senate scheduled to adjourn next week, ending its session for the year, Mr. Daschle said it would be pointless to try to vote on the revised House bill.

"Even if I wanted to take it up," he said, "it would never pass."

The original version, which included the abortion provision, was defeated in the House on Thursday on a procedural vote, 243 to 172, with 87 Republicans opposing the bill in defiance of House leaders and of the White

House, which had eagerly supported the measure.

Most of the Republican opponents suggested that without the abortion provision they would have voted for the overall bill. Almost all of them did vote for the bill after it was reintroduced on Thursday on the floor minus the abortion provision. The revised bill was adopted, 244 to 116, with no Republicans voting against it.

House sponsors of the stripped-down measure said it was a principled last-minute effort to present the Senate with a bankruptcy bill unencumbered by abortion politics. The new bill removed the "odious language that caused such a bitter debate," said Representative George W. Gekas, the Pennsylvania Republican who was an original sponsor.

Democrats said the revised bill was a cynical effort by Republican leaders to try to blame the Senate for the ultimate defeat of the bill, because House leaders knew that abortion-rights supporters in the Senate would filibuster, guaranteeing the bill's defeat with so little time left before the end of the Senate session.

The Democrats were quick to note that the abortion language was a compromise reached with Representative Henry J. Hyde, the Illinois Republican who is a leading opponent of abortion.

"Henry Hyde has signed on to this compromise," Mr. Daschle said today. "You had Republicans and Democrats who recognized the fragile nature of this compromise, and yet Republicans defeated it."

The House actions, he said, were "another indication of how the far right controls the House Republican caucus."

"There has never been a clearer demonstration of that," Mr. Daschle said.

Whatever the cause of the bill's collapse, prominent lawmakers in the House and Senate were left to explain the defeat to corporate lobbyists who considered passage of the bankruptcy bill to be among their major goals in Congress and who are among the most generous donors to Congressional candidates from both parties.

"A lot of the groups that have been working so hard on this bill have lost their stomach for it," Tracy Mullin, president of the National Federation of Retailers, said. "We need to let some time pass before we decide what to do next."

A spokeswoman for the American Bankers Association, Catherine Pulley, said her group would probably urge Congress to reintroduce the legislation when it reconvened next year.

For now, Ms. Pulley said, "we are very disappointed."

"This bill," she said, "has the curse of the Bambino."