

LARSON COMMITTED TO MEANINGFUL BALANCE OF EXPANDED GOVERNMENT SURVEILLANCE AND CIVIL PROTECTIONS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: December 14, 2005

LARSON COMMITTED TO MEANINGFUL BALANCE OF EXPANDED GOVERNMENT SURVEILLANCE AND CIVIL PROTECTIONS

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Congressman John B. Larson (CT-01) voted Wednesday against the conference report on the USA PATRIOT Improvement and Reauthorization Act of 2005 (H.R. 3199), stating that the revisions fail to correct the law's imbalance between aggrandized government surveillance powers and constitutional protections.

The conference report makes permanent 14 of the 16 most controversial provisions of the law and extends the other two for another four years.

Larson noted that when Congress expedited passage of the Patriot Act after Sept. 11, 2001 - greatly expanding the government's authority to investigate terrorism - it made many of the provisions temporary so that those measures with the potential for abuse or questionable overreach could be reviewed.

"Congress has ceded its oversight responsibilities," Larson said. "It has conducted no meaningful reviews to determine if these expanded powers have been misused or have proven necessary and effective. Nor has Congress even made an attempt to make good on its duty to have the Administration officials provide evidence that they are justified – and just. It is not too much to ask that Congress look at these powers every few years. All it asks is that Congress fulfill its obligations to the people it represents."

Joining Democrats in both Houses and several Republican senators in opposition, Larson said that the compromise bill inadequately protects innocent citizens with no ties to terrorism from being unfairly targeted.

"Investigating terrorism and upholding basic civil liberties are not mutually exclusive. These powers can be exercised in such a way as to thwart our enemies without trampling our basic rights. Being safe from terrorism is no victory if we cannot be safe from the tyranny of government. If we give up our democratic principles, then we have failed."

"In this bill, the thresholds safeguarding citizens from unwarranted 'sneak and peak' searches of their homes or investigations into the most personal aspects of their lives – their doctors' visits and their bedtime reading – are minimal to none," Larson added. "The justification for such intrusions should be greater than the say-so of government officials to a secret tribunal on a 'might be' basis with only the slimmest opportunity to challenge it. One of the first lessons our nation's forefathers imparted to us was to be wary of great power without meaningful checks."

Larson cited a Windsor librarian in his district who is challenging in court his right to publicly protest a "national security letter", which effectively demands unlimited access to records under a sweeping gag order, including any mention that the letter was ever received. The Conference Report makes scant improvements to this or several other particularly problematic provisions, he said.

"When librarians and business owners challenge a law because it is unreasonably intrusive, a bell should go off that it needs to be more deeply considered. These are not rabble-rousers, egging the overthrow of the government or aligning themselves with sleeper cells. They are law-abiding citizens concerned that these powers lean too far to the unlimited."

###