



GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT:

Towns to give up top Democratic slot on Oversight and Government Reform panel

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With House Democratic leaders set to recommend several ranking member slots for the 112th Congress today, Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Edolphus Towns (D-N.Y.) announced last night that he does not wish to remain the top Democrat on the panel.

"After much thought, Chairman Towns today made the decision not to seek the Ranking Member position on the Oversight and Government Reform Committee," a committee spokeswoman said in a statement.

Towns may try to regain his seniority on the Energy and Commerce Committee, from which he took a leave of absence in 2009 to become chairman of Oversight and Government Reform.

With Towns out of the picture, another New Yorker, Rep. Carolyn Maloney, the most senior Democrat on the oversight panel, has jumped into the race to become ranking member.

Towns, a 15-term congressional veteran, had said as recently as last week that he was planning to seek the ranking member slot, and it was not clear last night whether he jumped or was pushed.

As chairman for the past two years, Towns has had a testy relationship with the committee's ranking member, Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), a provocateur with a talent for attracting media attention who will become chairman in January. With a Democrat in the White House, Towns seemed to struggle occasionally with the committee's oversight role -- a stark contrast to the performance of his predecessor as chairman, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), when Republican George W. Bush was president.

While both Towns and Maloney represent districts in New York City, Towns has been media-shy through most of his political career, while Maloney has been anything but -- and she would no doubt relish the opportunity to go toe-to-toe with Issa.

Maloney may not be the only contender for the ranking member slot, however. Earlier this month, Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich, the fourth-ranking Democrat on the committee, announced that he wanted the top spot in the next Congress. But last night, he said he would step aside and urged Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.), the third-ranking member of the panel, to seek the top Democratic slot.

With Towns' departure, other contenders could emerge before the House Democratic Steering and Policy Committee meets today to recommend ranking members for several committees.

Whatever the steering committee recommends, the full Democratic caucus can override the decision. That happened just last week, when the steering panel recommended that Rep. Richard Neal (D-Mass.)

become ranking member of the Ways and Means Committee, but the full caucus the next day decided to keep the outgoing chairman, Michigan Rep. Sander Levin, in the top Democratic slot.

If House Democratic leaders are worried about having one fewer African-American member in a committee ranking position with Towns stepping aside, they could try to push Cummings over Maloney for the top spot.

Towns, who is 76, has occasionally been the object of retirement rumors in New York. His son, state Assemblyman Darryl Towns (D) , is seen as a likely contender for his Brooklyn-based seat whenever the congressman moves on.