

Barbara Lee to Head Congressional Black Caucus

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(San Francisco Chronicle) Rep. Barbara Lee was named chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus on Wednesday, giving the Oakland Democrat a high-profile platform to push her priorities, from increasing funding for HIV/AIDS to pushing for a speedy withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

At a news conference on Capitol Hill, the outgoing chairwoman, Rep. Carolyn Kilpatrick, D-Mich., handed over the wooden gavel and praised Lee as a "stalwart for human rights, global peace and social justice." Lee had considered challenging Kilpatrick for the job in 2006, but bowed out to avoid a divisive caucus fight.

"This is quite a moment for me," a jubilant Lee told reporters and fellow caucus members. "Now, we have an opportunity to really continue to lead and to really continue to be the conscience of the Congress."

As chairwoman during the 111th Congress that starts in January, Lee will take a lead role in pushing the agenda of the 43-member caucus - known by its acronym, CBC - which has historically been among the more powerful voting blocs in the House, with immense influence over legislation, appropriations and even presidential appointments.

Lee, who is stepping down as co-chairwoman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, is known for her fierce anti-war stands and represents one of the House's most liberal districts, including Oakland, Berkeley, Castro Valley and other parts of the East Bay. She was the only member of Congress to vote against the authorization of the use of force after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which she criticized as a "blank check."

Lee, 62, dodged questions about her agenda, saying she wants to wait until caucus members gather in January to decide the group's priorities. She also downplayed speculation that the caucus will have more clout under President-elect Barack Obama, a CBC member during his tenure in the Senate.

Noting Obama's pledge to be president of "the whole country," she said CBC will be just one of many House caucuses that will seek to influence Obama.

"We'll work together to support his agenda," she said.

CBC members praised Obama at the news conference for signaling that he plans to nominate Eric Holder, a former judge and federal prosecutor, as the nation's first African American attorney general. Holder, a former deputy attorney general in the Clinton administration, earned Obama's trust overseeing his search for a vice presidential nominee earlier this year.

Lee is likely to have little trouble getting her calls to Obama returned. She was an early supporter of his presidential bid, even while other senior CBC members backed his primary rival, New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton. Lee told reporters that she believes Obama remains committed to a rapid redeployment of U.S. forces from Iraq.

"I know he wants to end it," she said. "He was against it from day one. ... We have to see how he wants to do it."

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