

Senate Democrats push hate-crimes law

Republicans assail scheduling plan

By Amy Fagan
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Senate Democratic leaders plan to bring to the floor this week legislation broadening federal hate-crimes law to cover homosexuals and the disabled, while pushing a promised debate on human cloning until after the Memorial Day recess.

Republicans were not happy with the scheduling plan. Minority Whip Don Nickles of Oklahoma called it "interesting."

"I think we should do a budget and I thought there was a commitment to do cloning," he said.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle repeatedly had said he wanted the Senate to debate human cloning before Memorial Day.

But Senate Majority Whip Harry Reid, Nevada Democrat, said it is the Republicans' own fault that the human-cloning debate has not happened because, he said, they have dragged out debate on other issues.

"The arrangement was we would try to bring [cloning] up, but they've held us up on everything, so it's not our fault it hasn't come up," Mr. Reid said.

Mr. Daschle, South Dakota Democrat, tried to bring up the hate-

crimes bill — sponsored by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, Massachusetts Democrat — on Friday by unanimous consent, but Republicans objected.

Mr. Kennedy's bill would broaden the authority of the federal government to investigate and prosecute hate crimes. It would expand the federal definition of hate crimes to include those motivated by a person's sex, sexual orientation or disability, and would apply regardless of when or where a hate crime is committed.

Current federal law allows only race, color, religion or national origin to be the basis of a federal hate-crime case, and the covered offenses are limited to crimes committed against a person while doing one of six federally protected activities, such as voting or going to school.

Ron Bonjean, spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott, Mississippi Republican, said Republicans blocked the hate-crimes bill on Friday because Democrats were going to stop debate on the trade bill in order to proceed to it.

"Senator Lott believes we need to

stay on the trade bill and stay on the issue at hand so we can pass something significant in the Senate," Mr. Bonjean said. "The Senate Democrats — who have been in the majority for almost a year — have not passed a budget, have allowed the Andean trade authority to expire, have not brought to the floor a human cloning bill and have not moved one of the appropriations bills."

Mr. Daschle had strong words after the Republican objection Friday.

"At the end of the day, whatever day that is, this legislation will pass," he said of the hate-crimes bill. "It will either pass the easy way or the hard way, but it will pass. . . . The time has come and gone for delay, for explanation, for excuse, for anything else."

Stephanie Cutter, a spokeswoman for Mr. Kennedy, said the plan now is to bring the measure to the floor this week as a test of whether opponents have the required 41 votes to stop it. Democrats will move to proceed to the hate-crimes bill whenever the Senate finishes consideration of the trade bill, which could

happen Tuesday.

"Given the strong vote for this bill two years ago and the increase in bipartisan support since then, we're very hopeful we'll have the votes needed to bring the bill up for debate and pass it this year," she said.

An identical measure passed the Senate, 57-42, in June 2000 as an amendment to the defense authorization bill, but it was removed in a House-Senate conference.

Some are skeptical of it.

"I think we've got to be careful with that kind of legislation," said Sen. Jeff Sessions, Alabama Republican. "Criminal law is a powerful thing, and you need to be sure it's clearly targeted."

Meanwhile, Sen. Sam Brownback, Kansas Republican, still is waiting for the Senate to consider his bill to outlaw the cloning of human embryos for any purpose, including for medical research.

A competing bill, by Sens. Arlen Specter, Pennsylvania Republican, and Dianne Feinstein, California Democrat, and others, would outlaw the implantation of a cloned human embryo into a uterus, but would allow the human-cloning procedure to be done for medical research, including to extract stem cells.