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MIT professor apologizes for remark on voters

House panel rips MIT's Jonathan Gruber

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Jonathan Gruber testified during a US House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform hearing on Tuesday.

By Noah Bierman | GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 09, 2014

WASHINGTON — Jonathan Gruber, the MIT economist who once said passing President Obama’s health law depended on “the stupidity of the American voter,” endured a humiliating four-hour congressional hearing on Tuesday and apologized for remarks that he acknowledged were demeaning.

“I am embarrassed and I am sorry,” Gruber, who helped craft the Massachusetts law and was a consultant on the federal law, said at a House Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing.

Gruber denied repeated requests by the committee to confirm or deny that he had been paid at least \$2.5 million to help eight state governments implement the federal health law, prompting a threat from several members of the committee to subpoena the information after Gruber referred them to his lawyer.

Gruber called his comments, made during a series of academic conferences between 2011 and 2013 but only released in recent months, “glib, thoughtless, and sometimes downright insulting.”

He said he made them to make himself feel smarter and important but that they were “conjecture” and beyond his area of expertise and that he hoped they would not reflect negatively on the process used to pass the law. Gruber attempted to play down his role in crafting the health law, using the technical term — “economic microsimulation modeling” — to describe his chief contribution. He was paid \$400,000 as a consultant on the federal law.

Gruber’s prior comments included assertions that the federal law was “written in a tortured way” to deceive voters about taxes it imposes, and that it amounted to “a very clever, you know, basic exploitation of the lack of economic understanding of the American voter.”

But the words helped bolster Republicans’ arguments that the health law was passed deceptively, while at the same time outraging lawmakers of both parties.

“Professor Gruber is often said in Washington to be the definition of a gaffe. That is

somebody who accidentally tells the truth,” said Representative Darrell E. Issa, a California Republican who chairs the committee and is an opponent of the federal health law.

One after another, Republicans berated Gruber for insulting their constituents and used his comments to make the case that the Obama administration has repeatedly lied to Americans about the law. Democrats chastised him for handing Republicans a “political gift,” obscuring the law’s success in reducing the number of Americans who are uninsured.

“As far as I can tell, we are here today to beat up on Jonathan Gruber for stupid, I mean absolutely stupid comments, he made over the last few years,” said Representative Elijah Cummings, the top Democrat on the panel. “This may be good political theater but it will not help a single American get health insurance.”

Critics of the law also tried to seize on some of Gruber’s prior comments to add weight to a pending Supreme Court challenge that could hobble it. But Gruber refused, for the most part, to engage.

Tuesday’s hearing began with a showing of one of the videos of Gruber speaking on an academic panel on a large screen. By the time the hearing was over, Gruber’s pressed shirt was wrinkled and his face looked worn out. He walked silently beside his lawyer through the marble halls of the Capitol, with television cameras chasing him and reporters peppering him with more questions.

The day marked a stunning transformation for Gruber, from respected academic and consultant to prominent symbol for opponents of the health law. One Republican lawmaker said he had received more interest from his constituents regarding Tuesday’s hearing than for any that he had attended.

Governor Deval Patrick, a Democrat, declined a demand made last week from Massachusetts state Senate Republicans to remove Gruber from the board of the Massachusetts Health Connector.

Gruber made an ideal target for congressional Republicans trying to build the case that Democrats who wrote the law were looking down their noses at voters, forcing them to buy

health coverage and deceiving them about how the law would affect those who already have it. When one lawmaker asked if Gruber had earned his PhD at MIT, he corrected him: “No, my PhD is from Harvard.”

“Do you understand fully why it was so insulting? You patronized them,” said Representative Thomas Massie, a Kentucky Republican and MIT graduate who said it had “been a bad couple of months” for the school because of Gruber. “I submit to you my constituents are not your children and they have the right of self-determination.” Gruber could only look forward and repeat his statements of contrition.

“Do you feel bad for taking all this money for Obamacare from people you called stupid?” asked Representative Blake Farenthold, a Texas Republican.

Gruber responded that he was being paid as a consultant for economic modeling.

One Republican congresswoman, Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming, told the story of her husband’s recent death from a heart attack to illustrate the real-life consequences of health policy. She said she was not blaming the health law, but noted that he had declined to take a test that was not covered under his plan. Then she glared at Gruber with contempt. “So get over your damn glibness,” she said.

Gruber was not permitted to respond. But Marilyn Tavenner, who heads the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and was also testifying, expressed condolences and said she would look into the case. (Tavenner was forced to apologize for telling the committee in September that 7.3 million people had enrolled in health exchanges, conceding that about 400,000 of those people were double-counted because they were also enrolled in dental plans.)

If Gruber was hoping for defense from his home-state lawmakers, he got none.

Representative John F. Tierney, the outgoing congressman from Salem, left the hearing before waiting his turn to speak. Representative Stephen P. Lynch of South Boston said that he did not vote for the health law, and used his allotted time to spar with Gruber over the so-called Cadillac tax on certain health plans that he said was hurting union construction

workers.

In fact, the only time Democrats were able to score a point in the hearing was when they pointed out that Gruber had been a key consultant for the Massachusetts health plan under former Republican governor Mitt Romney. After Republicans on the panel said they might subpoena documents Gruber may have shared with the Obama administration and state governments, Representative Gerald E. Connolly, a Virginia Democrat, suggested including Gruber’s work for Romney.

“Do we have documents from the Romney period?” Connolly asked. “I certainly want to see whether this is a pattern.”

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