

Trial lawyer, lobbyist try to glimpse future

Attorney pleased with Obama while other worries about business

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WASHINGTON — Les Weisbrod is primed to play offense. And Bill Archer is ready to go on the defense.

The two Texans, both big players in Washington, were among the hundreds of thousands who closely watched Barack Obama's inauguration on Tuesday. Their own interests illustrate the skein of industries and interest groups that are likely to either flourish or wane under Democratic control of Congress and the White House.

For Weisbrod, a Dallas trial lawyer and president of the American Association of Justice, the moment symbolized a political life come full circle. Having grown up in North Dallas at a time when Democrats dominated Texas, he later watched his party wilt — and the influence of trial lawyers wane — as a Texas president championed tort reform.

"It's like going from persecution to fair play," said Weisbrod.

Archer, originally from Houston, retired from the U.S. House as chairman of the powerful tax-writing Ways and Means Committee in 2001. Since then, he's flourished as a lobbyist representing the tax interests of oil companies, insurance firms and airlines.

"There is a real fear within the business community right now that the whole environment is going to require tremendous additional revenues," Archer said. "And the business community is going to be very vulnerable for those tax increases."

While both men watched Tuesday's events with interest, neither said they read too much into Obama's speech. Nor were they very impressed.

Weisbrod called it "very bland" but added he was amazed by the more than 1 million people who flooded the National Mall, which Archer avoided.

The Republican watched, he said, "from the comfort of

my warm living room" in Arlington, Va.

"I was not elevated emotionally by it, as I have been to a much greater degree by other speeches he's given," Archer said. "Maybe it was just me, but I thought he just strung together a lot of things that included nothing new."

Weisbrod, 55, made a week of it, spending Sunday evening at a reception for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Monday at an exclusive concert staged by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

Change was already in the air. On Sunday, Pelosi told him that Democrats in Congress plan to press Obama to overturn Bush-administration rulemaking that limited consumers' abilities to sue drug companies, he said. The measure has been a priority for Weisbrod's AAJ, which issued a report in 2007 that was critical of the FDA's advocacy for limiting such lawsuits.

"They [the Bush administration] have basically sacrificed consumers for big pharma, big insurance, big corporations," said Weisbrod, who will serve as president of the group through July 2009.

Archer said he's not optimistic that Obama's administration will prove beneficial to workers and businesses who are struggling through the recession. The new president's first major policy challenge, an \$825 billion economic stimulus package, is unlikely to have "any measurable impact" on the economy, he argued.

"The only way that you can seem to be doing something is to do something like the stimulus package," he said.

Weisbrod's interests are different. Trial lawyers want Congress to overturn a recent Supreme Court decision that shielded medical-device manufacturers from state lawsuits.

Obama hasn't always presented himself as an ally of trial lawyers. During the campaign, he promoted one of his votes against legislation to limit non-economic damages in medical-malpractice lawsuits.

Attorneys donated \$42.3 million to Obama during the 2008 election cycle, although there were no trial-lawyer firms among his 10 largest do-

nors. Trial lawyers contributed heavily to Vice President Joe Biden's primary campaign. Four of his 10 largest contributors were plaintiffs' attorneys firms, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

"He's voted against us on some of our issues, but he is fair and reasonable and willing to listen," Weisbrod said. "Versus eight years of lawyer bashing where it was bad to be a lawyer and everything evil was blamed on lawyers.

"That is a huge difference for lawyers. We think that is really good."