

OBAMA'S DRIFT IS SWIFT!

Stephen L. Bakke – September 11, 2009

This is a follow-up to my recent report on suggestions for health care reform.

Getting a Voice

I am tired of hearing arguments from liberal would-be health care reformers, that theirs is the only reform being presented. They characterize Republican opposition proposals as being just more of the “same old thing” or “maintaining the status quo.” Why are these alternatives characterized as not being worthy of consideration in the reform debate? Because, in many extremists’ minds, including the President’s, there is no real reform unless it is somewhere in the continuum from a public insurance alternative, through single payer and nationalized health care, to socialized medicine. They claim that no alternatives are being presented. Nothing could be farther from the truth!

Numerous organizations, private individuals, and legislators have presented alternatives which are viable alternatives and real reform. But they haven’t had an effective voice. This could be because their ideas are a little too close to being popular and appealing. And with too much scrutiny, they might gather some momentum, and that wouldn’t advance the real agenda of the liberals of transforming the country into something it never has been.

But I think there recently has been movement in a positive direction. Do ya’ s’pose that’s possible?

There Been Several Important Developments

Much to the surprise of congressional democrats, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) reported on the cost and effectiveness efforts of the Senate version draft of reform legislation. Under questioning by the Senate Budget Committee, the CBO’s director said the bills drafted by both House and Senate do not propose “the sort of fundamental changes” necessary to have a positive effect on the rising costs of governmental health programs. The measures actually would increase the cost of governmental health programs. Senator Dick Shumer dismissed these as “wacky” cost estimates. And what about the month of August and the town hall meetings? Some are asking the President to “slow down” so the right things can be done. Is Obama’s armor showing some cracks?

How About Those Town Hall Meetings!

I can’t add much to the fun and inspirational drama that occurred during the August congressional recess. It was just a WOW! all around. A lot of unfortunate B.S., but all told, very inspiring and energizing. I believe it ensured some significant changes in a

conservative direction as the “conversation” continues. I am reminded of some words by Bob Dylan – the “poet” of my generation. Remember this? It kind of applies in a very new and different way:

“Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call.
Don’t stand in the doorway
Don’t block up the hall.
For he that gets hurt
Will be he who has stalled.
There’s a battle outside
And it is ragin’.
It’ll soon shake your windows
And rattle your walls.
For the times they are a-changin’.”

Is Obama Drifting?

President Obama, in a show of defiance recently, had a few things to say. After a “bluster” about inaction not being an option, he said: “During the campaign I promised health care reform that would control costs, expand coverage and ensure choice and I promised that Americans making \$250,000 a year or less would not pay more in taxes. These are promises that we’re keeping as reform moves forward”. Please note that he used the words “expand coverage”, not “universal coverage”, and the words “ensure choice” not “public option”. And now his words reflect “by the end of the year”, rather than emphasis on completion before the August congressional recess. I think this is a change and he is purposely drifting in his stated goals so as to provide cover for an eventual reform which is far different than his original intention. And some of this drift was accelerated by the vigorous August “debates.” And this week we heard his address to the joint session of congress.

I will attempt to show the changing rhetoric over just a few months – some obvious and some very subtle. Much of the following information is from Obama, but others and their comments are also included:

Some early examples of “mood” and attitude by the President and his faithful:

- Very early on, Obama tipped off his original agenda by saying he preferred a single payer system but that it would take up to 15 or 20 years to accomplish it.
- House Speaker Pelosi stated: "It's almost immoral what (insurance companies) are doing. Of course they've been immoral all along in how they have treated the people they insure. They are the villains.
- Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders stated: “(Private insurance companies) should be afraid ... they have a right to be exposed, a right to be afraid that they will not be able to compete against a strong Medicare type public plan ...”
- How about Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) who stated: "I think if we get a good public option, it could lead to single payer and that's the best way to reach single

- payer I think the best way we're gonna' get single payer, the only way, is to have a public option and demonstrate its strength and its power."
- Representative Jan Schakowsky, (D-Chicago, north side and suburbs), chief deputy house whip, cites an insurance spokesman saying: "A public option will put the private insurance industry out of business and lead to single payer My single-payer friends, he was right."
 - Professor Jacob Hacker, Yale's "Stanley B. Resor" Professor of Political Science, said the following: With a government option plan, "You can at least make the claim that there's a competitive system between the public and the private sector" the government option "would eliminate the small group insurance Someone told me this was a Trojan horse for single-payer. Well, it's not a Trojan horse, right? It's just right there. I'm telling you. We're going to get there ..."
 - "Big Ed" Shultz, of CNBC's "The Ed Show", clearly states that the single payer government system is a long term goal of most "progressives".
 - Obama's close health care advisor Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel has stated that people in the U.S. are guilty of overusing medical care.
 - Dr. Emanuel also wrote: "When the worse-off can benefit only slightly while better-off people could benefit greatly, allocating to the better-off is often justifiable" (and they wonder how the idea of rationing develops).

There has been some noticeable evolution as exemplified by the following:

- Early this summer we began hearing the words "health insurance reform" replacing "health care reform."
- The words "ensure choice" are popping up in place of "public option".
- Obama originally said "you can keep your coverage if you desire", but now he speaks in terms of "nothing in the legislation will **require** you to change."
- Now Obama's words reflect passing the bill "by the end of the year", rather than "this month" or "before the August congressional recess".
- He once spoke of greedy drug companies – in the joint session this week, he didn't mention them – but they had already "cow towed" to him in an agreement.
- Obama once spoke unkindly of hospitals – in the joint session he didn't mention them – they had already acquiesced to him in a cooperative agreement.
- He once was totally adamant about including a public option, now he uses words like "it must be one of the considered options."
- He once at least implied the policy of accepting only a public option, now in the joint session he acknowledged arguments for both sides.
- Very early on Obama spoke of the public option as the only way to keep insurance companies honest. Now, in the joint session, he refers to it as merely a means to an end and just one option to achieve competition.
- The Administration, through Secretary Sebelius, is now saying: "What's important is choice and competition."
- The President never breathed a word about tort reform until the joint session where he announced a study to determine the affect of litigation on costs of health care – that's not tort reform, but it does indicate some marginal change in tone.

- Obama was critical of John McCain’s health care reform suggestions during the campaign, but he is now crediting McCain for some of the ideas being considered.
- Obama’s early support for the public option seemed to support subsidizing it with government funds, but now he gives assurances that he wants to maintain a level playing field with no subsidies for the public option (I doubt that!).
- The President once spoke of total transformation, but now says we should stick with “what works” and fix only “what’s broken.”
- Recently his supporters used conciliatory terms such as “might miss a few in coverage”, “get the best bill possible”, and “normal give and take of negotiation.”
- He once spoke of 47 million uninsured, this week it is down to 30 million.
- Even former presidential hopeful and former DNC chairman Howard Dean, one of the most intransigent of the Obamacare supporters seemed to indicate that insurance reform, even without a public option, was a good thing. He originally stated that without the public option there would be no value in continuing.
- David Axelrod declined to comment when asked if the President would veto a bill if it came to his desk without the public option.
- And how about this. David Axelrod states that Obama believes in “fundamental principles” about overhauling health care, but “he’s not dogmatic about how we get there.” At least not any more he isn’t.



Do you get a sense of “movement”? Our president is nothing if not smart, crafty, and immensely pragmatic. He’s keeping the responsibility for creating reform in congress while he stands back from the “fray”, inserting himself only when he can use his rhetorical skills to impress and inspire. Most of the political risk is placed on congress rather than on himself – no accident – while he artfully frames himself as the motivator and rescuer – the hero or savior of the moment. Witness his recent speech to the joint session of congress – he still didn’t fill in any significant blanks to clarify his plan for reform. He left the ball, and the blame, in the lap of congress. He’s good at this folks!

Sources of Information

The major sources of information used in developing my health care commentaries were included in my recent report on health care reform recommendations.