



Healthy reform likely despite Republican ill will

The President has proposed some smart new health-care initiatives, says **LESLIE RUSSELL**

President Barack Obama's speech on health-care reform to the joint session of Congress last week was a rare example of a leader simultaneously reframing the agenda on a key election issue and pointedly highlighting the barriers to its enactment.

As commentators rightly noted, there was a lot riding on this speech. There is even more riding on what happens next.

The President started by outlining the economic imperatives for health-care reform, an essential component of tackling the budget deficit and making social welfare and health programs sustainable into the future.

He concluded by reminding the Congress and the American people, using the words of the late Senator Ted Kennedy, but with an impassioned rhetoric of his own, that health-care reform is not just about future prosperity but also social justice and the very character of the nation.

Importantly, the first half of the speech clearly stated the Obama health-care reform proposals, what the key elements are and why. There were no surprises and relatively little deviation from the basic proposal outlined in Obama's election campaign, with as much detail as reasonably could be expected in a one-hour speech.

Those decrying the lack of definition will surely also be expected to decry the extent of legislative language which is needed to provide it.

There were some smart new initiatives included, such as immediately providing insurance cover for people who have lost it because of pre-existing conditions and innovative demonstration projects to address medical malpractice, taken from a range of

bipartisan sources.

There were clear messages to reassure those who have health cover, to give hope to those without it, and to seniors who are fearful of a government takeover of their government-run and government-funded Medicare program.

The President also made it clear that the cost of these reforms, \$US900 billion (\$A1.043 billion) over 10 years, is fully paid for. The sceptics, those who had no concerns about the impact on the deficit of the \$A2.86 trillion Bush administration tax cuts, have been circulating analyses from a range of conservative think tanks that attempt to undermine these costings.

Realistically no one can predict what health-care technology and costs will look like 20 years from now, but some doubts can be assuaged by the use of legislative "trigger" language which will implement specific actions if expected savings don't materialise.

The Obama proposal will most likely be incorporated into the Bill that is taken to the House floor under Speaker Nancy Pelosi's guidance. It's less clear what will happen in the Senate, but presumably there will be a collaborative effort between the White House, Senate leaders and the two relevant committees.

However, it is now excruciatingly clear that this will not be a bipartisan effort. The Republicans have shown themselves to be bankrupt of ideas, comity and respect for a president who won office with a clear mandate to tackle health-care reform. Their formal response to the speech was short on detail and bereft of savings.

Obama's speech clearly aimed to make their intransigent opposition to reform look counter-productive and dishonest. But in fact he could have saved his words; the Republicans made the case very effectively

themselves with behaviour during the speech that was rude, petty and disingenuous.

Under normal circumstance, that would have seen several of them ejected from the House Chamber.

There are several indicators that should give heart to those who are looking for quick and meaningful reform. The uproar of August does not seem to have greatly altered public opinion or substantially weakened Democrats' resolve. Critical players in the health-care industry remain at the negotiation table.

There is still strong public support for action, with 82 per cent of Americans saying the health system needs either fundamental changes or rebuilding and 60 per cent favouring a public insurance option.

Despite tensions between moderate and liberal Democrats, there is broad agreement between them over what most of the package should look like.

Getting a Bill through the Senate remains a big challenge, but there is a reasonable chance of corraling the 60 votes needed.

Ironically, the failure of the Senate Finance Committee to reach a bipartisan agreement makes passage of a holistic reform Bill more likely.

Obama's clarion call to his party and those who care about the millions of Americans with inadequate health care is that "the time for games has passed, now is the season for action".

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