

Letter from Washington No 11

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Death of a Lion

The US is mourning the passing of Senator Edward Kennedy, the “liberal lion of the Senate”. The fascination with the Kennedy clan has often been explained as America’s yearning for a royal family, but the fact is, despite their many flaws, this was a family with a unique commitment to public service.

Over the past four decades Senator Kennedy has left his fingerprints on the nation’s laws in civil rights, immigration, labour, education and health and used his rhetoric to call the nation to action on these issues. He was so often the voice for those who had no voice, and he brought compassion and passion to a Congress where these emotions are increasingly not just absent but denigrated.

His personal life might have been littered with scandal and tragedy, but Senator Kennedy was an effective and powerful legislator for unfashionable liberal causes that have made critical differences in the lives of African-Americans, immigrants, poor children and low-income workers, the disabled and people with HIV/AIDS. He took on tough issues such as voting rights and increasing the minimum wage in political eras dominated by conservatives – and he won. He won because he was adept at forging alliances and deal-making, because he knew when to compromise and when to take a moral stand. Often he won because he was not afraid to lose.

Kennedy called health care reform “the cause of my life”. He died exactly a year after his last big speech at the Democratic National Convention in Denver on August 25, 2008, where he argued for “new hope that we will break the old gridlock and guarantee that every American -- north, south, east, west, young, old -- will have decent, quality health care as a fundamental right and not a privilege.” That kind of hope and commitment is mocked only by those who already have access to decent, quality health care.

Kennedy was instrumental in helping to create the Children’s Health Insurance Program, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Ryan White CARE Act to provide health care for HIV/AIDS patients, and legislation to require health insurers to provide mental health and substance abuse coverage equivalent to that for other health conditions.

During my seven years working on the Energy and Commerce Committee in the US House of Representatives, I was involved in some of these pieces of legislation and worked closely with Kennedy and his staff. It wasn’t Kennedy’s best era – he was between marriages and often drank too much. But he always attracted great staff, and the work always got done. It was from Ted Kennedy that I first came to appreciate the links

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between mental illness and substance abuse and the need to integrate these services better.

Today much is made of the fact that the push for health care reform is weakened because of Senator Kennedy's absence. Yes, his lion's roar and indefatigable energy would surely have galvanised Democrats, but in today's environment it's hard to see what Senator Kennedy might have done to get a bipartisan bill. Former Republican collaborators such as Senators Orrin Hatch and John McCain speak piously but show no signs of substantive action. It is likely that Senator Kennedy would be angered by those who use his absence to explain their failures on what he saw as a defining issue for society.

And to demonstrate that there are no depths to which right-wing media commentators won't sink, Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck have now accused Democrats of exploiting Kennedy's death to get health care reform passed.

Senator Kennedy's death may well become a rallying cry that helps to pass health reform legislation, but arguably he has already left his greatest legacy through his work on civil rights. This began as the first legislative challenge he took on in 1964, when he tried to abolish the poll tax, a \$2 charge imposed on African-Americans to cast a vote. It culminated last January, when he saw hope translated into reality as Barack Obama was sworn in as the first African- American president.