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The International Perspective on America's Healthcare Reform Battles

The August Congressional recess is almost over. It's not been a particularly august period in the debate over healthcare reform. As the possibility of reform becomes more likely and the details of reform become more evident, battle lines have been drawn, not always along substantive issues.

Some of the ammunition is very old stuff being recycled yet again. The spectre of socialism is endlessly invoked, with implications that the US could end up, not like Cuba or even North Korea, but worse, Canada or Britain. Australia doesn't figure as an example of where not to go - the intricacies and generosity of the PBS are unknown here.

In 1961 a youthful, mellifluous Ronald Reagan spoke out against health programs for the poor on the grounds that "One of the traditional methods of imposing statism [sic] or socialism on a people has been by way of medicine". Under Reagan's anti-government ideology, which he propounded throughout his career, government involvement in health insurance coverage can only lead to a totalitarian future. In 2009 conservatives have been reusing these Reagan lines in their opposition to healthcare reform.

Ultra-conservatives claim that health reform violates the Tenth Amendment. Under the 'tenth' constitution, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, federal education funding, the Veterans Affairs health system and the G.I. Bill are all illegal, beyond the power of the federal government to enact.

The opponents of healthcare reform fail to see the irony in their push for the government to stay away from government-funded Medicare and government-operated veterans' health programs, and presumably do not know that life expectancy is longer and infant mortality rates are lower in Canada and Britain, and Cuba too.

They rail against rationing, treatment waiting times, and government intervention in doctor-patient relationships that will inevitably result if the US moves to a Canadian-style healthcare system or uses comparative effectiveness research to determine best practice in medicine as in the UK.

Across the border and the Atlantic, Canadians and Britons are starting to hit back, tired of being typecast as countries with failing healthcare systems. Canadians, not unlike Australians, do not see their healthcare system as an unmitigated disaster, even while acknowledging that it is flawed.

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A recent poll found that patients in Canada are more frustrated by waiting times to see medical specialists than patients in the US. But 65% of Canadians said they had access to all the healthcare services they needed at costs they could afford, a percentage that did not change with income; 49% of all Americans felt the same way, and that figure dropped to 37% for low-income Americans. In the US, 59% of those with chronic conditions are satisfied with their access to care. In Canada, it's 69%.

Britons are also sick of ill-informed Americans latching on to a few bad experiences and skewed comments regarding healthcare in the UK. The stories have ranged from the benign to the outright asinine. They include claims that Ted Kennedy's brain cancer would have gone untreated and that Stephen Hawking would have been left to die under the NHS.

Two British women who became the unwitting stars of a campaign to derail Obama's healthcare reforms have now publicly explained that they were misled about their televised interviews and that their views on the NHS had been misrepresented. They were told they were being interviewed for a documentary and were not aware that the footage was to be used for political advertisements.

In a final irony, it emerges that the woman who starred in the infamous Harry and Louise advertisements that are generally credited with killing off the Clinton health care reform effort was also conned into doing those television spots in 1994. Then she was a single mother whose time in Australia in the 1980s had left her a great fan of 'socialised' medicine. She had campaigned for Clinton and wanted health care reform, but she also needed to pay the bills, and when she initially balked at her lines, she was literally seduced into continuing by the political consultant involved.

But in 2009 Louise has made a redemptive comeback, back with Harry in a new advertising campaign in support of the Obama plan.

Meanwhile, the conservative media failed to report that last month in California an estimated ten thousand people lined up for days to receive free medical, dental and optical treatment in a scene reminiscent of an aid expedition in the third world.