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Now is the season for action

Given the partisan split in responses to President Obama's speech on health care reform to the joint session of Congress, it will come as no surprise that I saw this as a leader taking on the debate, reframing the agenda, and pointedly highlighting the barriers to its enactment.

Obama made it quite clear that he does not intend to allow the status quo - which sees millions of people, in what purports to be the world's greatest and wealthiest democracy, go without affordable, reliable access to health care - to continue. 'The time for bickering is over. The time for games has passed. Now is the season for action.'

Obama used the first half of his speech to clearly state his reform proposals, what the key elements are and why. Those who have been paying attention all along would have noted no surprises and little deviation from the basic plan outlined in his election campaign. Those decrying the lack of definition will surely also be decrying the extent of legislative language which is needed to provide it.

He was smart to include some Republican initiatives such as John McCain's proposal for providing insurance cover for people who have lost it because of pre-existing conditions and the previous administration's idea for demonstration projects to address medical malpractice - and in fact both of these ideas will be implemented immediately, without the need for legislative action.

But when the President highlighted the previous efforts of McCain, Hatch and Grassley in health care, they sat sheepishly, clearly unwilling or unable to take up a leadership role from within a party that is fractured and fearful, that finds it easier to oppose than to propose.

The President also made it clear that the cost of these reforms, \$900 billion over 10 years, is fully paid for, and will contain a 'failsafe trigger' to ensure that is the case. Meanwhile, the same party that had no concerns about the impact on the deficit of the \$1.8 trillion Bush Administration tax cuts, or the fact that the true (and unfunded) cost of the Bush Medicare prescription drug bill was deliberately hidden, has been circulating analyses from a range of conservative think tanks about the cost of health care reform.

What last night made excruciatingly clear that there is no possibility that health care reform will 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.

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Their formal response to the speech was short on detail and bereft of savings and repeated the same old saws. But it was the behaviour of the Republicans in the House Chamber during the speech that was so shocking.

I'm sure they were taken by surprise at being 'called out' by the President - his speech clearly aimed to make their intransigent opposition to reform look counter-productive and dishonest. However he could have saved his words; the Republicans made the case very effectively themselves with behaviour that was unforgiveable and extraordinarily disrespectful. Under normal circumstance, it would have seen several of them ejected from the House Chamber.

The audio (Rep Joe Wilson shouting 'you lie') and the visual (Rep Eric Cantor checking his Blackberry) doesn't work in Republicans' favour. It does not encourage the public, 82% of whom still want major health reform, to think that Republicans have their health care concerns at heart.

Despite dire predictions, the chances were always good for a health care reform bill arriving on the President's desk before the end of the year. My assessment is that those chances have just improved substantially, thanks to a President who's prepared to lead and a Republican party that is actively working to make itself irrelevant in process.