

LETTER FROM SYDNEY

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A tale of health care reform in two cities

I'm back in Sydney for two weeks for work, and I'm making the most of the great coffee, wondering why Australian newspapers are so large, and buying up on vegemite (the real stuff, that new formulation is for American CEOs and bloggers who don't know better), and rolling my eyes at the implosion of the federal Coalition.

But the real shocker is the dearth of activity and progress that has been made on health care reforms here. The Rudd Government is now armed with a mountain of reports, reviews, strategies and priorities, but all they can do is a 'listening tour' which looks suspiciously like an excuse for inaction and a mask for uncertainty.

I wonder why the grass-root constituencies are not calling for the Government to deliver on its election promises in this election cycle, not the next one. And I regret the emasculation of the Opposition and its Shadow Minister for Health, too busy with political machinations to hold the Government to account.

Meanwhile, in contrast, health care reform continues to move forward in Washington. The Congressional Budget Office analysis shows that the \$829 billion spending in the Senate Finance Committee bill is more than fully paid for and will deliver a net deficit reduction of \$81 billion. The bill's provisions will provide health insurance cover to 94% of the eligible population. Senate majority Leader Harry Reid is getting on with the job of merging the two Senate bills into a single bill to go to the Senate floor. He's apparently opting for a small negotiating team – Baucus, Dodd, top White House aids, possibly Harkin, Rockefeller, Conrad and Snowe as a wild card.

On the House side, Speaker Pelosi has been working round the clock to structure a bill to take to the House floor before the end of the month. Whatever the outcome, based on her meeting schedule no-one can say that their point of view on the bill has not been heard.

But many Republicans are still raising the same stale objections; some are even inventing new reasons to oppose the legislation. For example, Senator Grassley, once a member of the Gang of Six, has developed a new-found opposition to the individual mandate - a policy that even health insurers support. Yet in June, in an appearance on Fox News Sunday, Grassley said, "there isn't anything wrong with it [an individual mandate], except some people look at it as an infringement upon individual freedom. But when it comes to states requiring it for automobile insurance, the principle then ought to lie the same way for health insurance. Because everybody has some health insurance costs, and if you aren't insured, there's no free lunch. Somebody else is paying for it...I believe that there is a bipartisan consensus to have individual mandates."

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However there is growing bipartisan support

(<http://features.csmonitor.com/politics/2009/10/07/five-republicans-that-want-the-gop-to-back-healthcare-reform/>) for action on health care reform. Former Bush Administration Secretary of HHS Tommy Thompson has joined with Democratic former House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt to issue a statement in support of reform, saying that “Failure to reach an agreement on health reform this year is not an acceptable option”. Last week former Senate Republican Leader Bill Frist – a surgeon – said he would vote for health care reform. He said that even though he’d probably “take heat” from his party, “that’s leadership”. That’s what California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg also think.

Meanwhile Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal tried to edge his way into the debate but merely reprised his uncanny talent for clunkers. In a Washington Post opinion piece (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/04/AR2009100402003.html>), he added to the chorus of Republicans criticising their party’s leadership and pressing them “to join the battle of ideas” on health reform. However he was apparently unaware that eight of the ten ideas he proposed for consideration are already incorporated into the House bill. It’s time for Jindal to turn off Fox News and read the legislation – he might be pleasantly surprised.