

LETTER FROM WASHINGTON No 21

21 October 2009

More Talk from Republicans While Democrats Advance the Ball on Health Care Reform

Here in Washington, the House and Senate leadership are beavering away on bills which could come to the floor in each chamber before the end of the month. Meanwhile Republicans have still produce a health care reform policy. Even Senator McCain has noticed that this is lacking.

“We Republicans need to come up with our agenda,” McCain said last Sunday on CNN’s State of the Union

(<http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/10/11/mccain.afghanistan/index.html>). “And we need to do it so that there is a viable alternative to this [legislation in the Senate Finance Committee]. And it has to do with things that are not associated with government-controlled health care in America”.

Senator Mitch Connell, the Republican Leader in the Senate, is doing his bit; earlier this week he delivered his 50th floor speech since the beginning of June – or the 50th version of the same speech - denouncing the Democrats' health-care reform plans. This speech really represents the strategy of congressional Republicans on health care reform: keep doing the same thing over and over again, always hoping for a different result.

The endless replays of this speech have been analysed in an hilarious article by Dana Milbank in the Washington Post (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/21/AR2009102103586.html?sub=AR>).

A new whisper around Washington, now that passage of legislation looks increasingly likely, is that opponents of health care reform are laying the groundwork for lawsuits to stall and eventually kill any Democratic legislative victory. A broad group of conservatives has begun to explore how to file such lawsuits, who would file them, and what components of the legislation would be challenged, if not all of it.

As if to goad these conservatives into action, a new Washington Post – ABC News poll (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/graphic/2009/10/20/GR2009102000148.html>) shows that support for a government-run health care plan to compete with private insurers has rebounded from its summer lows and wins clear majority support from the public (57% support; 40% oppose). There is also clear support for a mandate requiring all Americans to have health insurance.

Menzies Centre ^{of} Health Policy



The University of Sydney

The poll does show that people are leery about the proposed changes to the health care system (45% support; 48% oppose), and there are some deep splits over whether the proposed changes go too far or not far enough. But since last month there has been a 9 points increase in the number who say that government should be more involved.

Two further polls out today from CNN / Opinion Research Corporation

(<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2009/10/21/cnn-poll-americans-split-on-obama-proposals/>) and USA Today Gallup (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/123782/In-U.S.-39-Say-View-Healthcare-Depends-Details.aspx>) have similar findings.

Some of this change in support towards health care reform is because there has been a raft of hearings and reports highlighting the problems Americans face with health insurance every day. The Shriver Report, which Erin Riley blogged (<http://ussc.edu.au/articles/The-Hidden-Gender-Issues-in-Health-Care-Reform>) about earlier this week is just one example.

Sometimes the Republicans only open their mouths to change feet. A recent newspaper article (<http://blogs.wsj.com/numbersguy/the-trouble-with-ranking-national-health-care-systems-819/>) that highlighted that maybe WHO data that ranked the US 37th with respect to health care was less than accurate, was eagerly seized upon. But it seems no-one read all the article, which went on to state that new UN data shows that the US is seriously lagging in some of the key indicators of public health. For example, from 2000 to 2009 the US slipped from 18th to 24th rank in male life expectancy and 28th to 35th rank in female life expectancy. Rankings in preventing male and female mortality in children under 5 also slipped to the 30s.

Meanwhile, while the right watches Glenn Beck tear up at the good old days, the left, who watch MSNBC, have been contributing to a fund (<https://npo.networkforgood.org/Donate/Donate.aspx?npoSubscriptionId=1000863&code=NAFC2009>) to support free health clinics around the nation. In all, about 4 million Americans are expected to visit the country's 1,200 free health clinics this year.