



# Obama pitches to middle class

The economy and jobs were key issues in his speech, **LESLEY RUSSELL** writes

President Barack Obama's State of the Union speech came at a time when the winds of change which helped blow him into office have turned to blow an icy blast of voter anger in his face. This was exemplified when the day of his speech saw Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner under fire in the Senate over his role in the AIG rescue, a House committee dealing with a Republican-sponsored resolution of inquiry that would compel the White House to turn over information on its agreements and negotiations on health care reform, and a new poll showing that two-thirds of Americans think the country is on the wrong track.

It might have been very different. If health care reform had moved just a little faster, it could have been law by now; but for 100,000 votes in the only state in the union that has mandatory health cover, the Senate super-majority would still be there.

Obama's speech, directed to a divided Congress and a dissatisfied electorate, clearly placed the economy and jobs as the key issues going forward, and put the ongoing effort towards health care reform in that context.

His primary focus was on middle-class families who, over the past decade, have seen a steady decline in wages, retirement savings and home values, while the costs of health care and education have risen.

The President was not shy in ascribing blame for the financial crisis his Administration inherited, and in taking credit for the effectiveness of current fiscal policies. In an appeal to populism, banks, big business, and business as usual in Washington were portrayed as the villains.

Obama was also pointed about the absolute necessity of not

walking away from the hard issues such as health care reform and energy, and several times challenged the Senate to act on bills which have already passed the House.

In doing so, he spoke more about the responsibilities of government and elected officials, and less about the details of what should be done to drive forward stalled legislation.

The demeanour of the Republicans in the chamber for the speech and the bland Republican response delivered by the newly-elected Governor of Virginia, Bob McDonnell, provide little hope for a diminution in the current levels of partisan animosity in Washington or any new policy approaches from the right.

Obama's plans for fees on banks to claim back the tax dollars that bailed them out, ending tax breaks to companies which ship jobs overseas, providing additional help for college education and small businesses, and recouping the budget deficit incurred by the Recovery Act were received with apathy by the Republicans who variously smirked, yawned and sat without applauding.

Still, they must have been shocked by his willingness to call them out on their current approach of delay and obfuscation. He told the Republican leadership that if they continue to insist that 60 votes in the Senate are required to enact every piece of legislation, then they must also assume some of the responsibility for the problems of government, including, presumably, the public distaste and distrust of political processes.

Obama took not only the Republicans but the Senate and even the Supreme Court to the woodshed, and reminded Democrats that they still have the largest majority in decades, so

people expect them to solve some problems, not "run for the hills".

While the politicians and pundits have poured over this speech and parsed it in detail, the most important audience for the President's speech was the watching public who will be voting in the mid-term elections later this year.

As Obama bravely acknowledged, there are many Americans who aren't sure if they still believe in his campaign promise of change or that he can deliver it. Their anger and confusion will not be assuaged by words, even if they feel that the President understands their concerns, their burdens and their frustrations. Their opinions, and subsequently their votes, turn on his ability to deliver.

In large part that will turn on how effectively Obama and the Democrats can drive the debate on the issues forward on their terms, make the case about the consequences of inaction and the status quo, and call the Republicans' bluff on threats to filibuster and withhold votes on key legislation.

It will also require some Democrats to pay more attention to the needs of their electorate than their own need to be re-elected, and a few brave Republicans to show they are not intimidated by the Tea Party conservatives but are willing to be effective players in the political arena.

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