

Autumn Harvest

**By Maria L. Fornella*

Last week, before a joint session of Congress that was televised in prime time, President Obama made what was arguably his most effective speech yet on health care reform. He outlined his main goals with clarity, provided details about funding and indicated his flexibility to include some Republican initiatives such as medical malpractice reform. He tried to reassure those who have health insurance and are happy with it, that they would be able to keep it. He talked about coverage security and stability. He also hinted that he was ready to be flexible on the central tenet of his plan, the public option, which, he said, is “a means to an end”, and therefore replaceable if that “end” (lowering costs by introducing competition) can be reached by other ways. By articulating his vision with determination, common sense and pragmatism, he seems to have reclaimed the debate that had slipped from his grip during the summer months, and gained new momentum in the approaching battle that will dominate the fall legislative agenda. He reminded Americans why he was elected, rebuked his enemies’ arguments, dispelled their myths and reaffirmed his electoral mandate. However, he still faces significant opposition from the public. A new Washington Post-ABC poll taken after his speech shows 45% of Americans are in favor and 48% opposed to the President’s plan.

While his speech may have rallied all Democrats (Blue Dogs included) behind his effort, it did not at first look to have had much impact on the attitude of the opposition. During the address, TV cameras showed most Republican senators and representatives looking skeptical, shaking their heads, and in the case of the House Minority leader John Boehner, appearing extremely tense and dour, almost aggressive, especially during the strongest moments of the President’s speech that drew the most applause. This negativity reached its peak with Representative Joe Wilson’s clearly audible heckle of “*You Lie!*” in response to President Obama’s claim that illegal immigrants would not be covered by his overhaul proposal. In a presidential system, this hostile outburst is both an unprecedented and

unacceptable breach of protocol. The President is both the head of government and the head of state, and members of Congress are expected to respect the institution of the presidency, a separate and independent branch, most especially so when the President is visiting the House. Although at the behest of his party's leadership, Wilson later apologized to the White House, when interviewed by the media he wasted no time in reassuring his South Carolina constituency that his outburst had been both emotional and sincere, and refused to make a formal apology the next day on the floor of the House. He insisted that he "*won't be muzzled*" and that he will continue to speak "*against a government takeover of health care.*" He has clearly decided to grab on to the excitement and mobilization of that 10 % of the Republican base.

Such is the spirit of the times that incivility and disruption of the summer town hall meetings has spilled over to the Capitol itself. On the same week, the extreme right once again took the nation by surprise when they boisterously opposed the President's "Back to school" speech, an address on the first day of school that was televised at noon for all public schools to watch. In it, the President talked about the importance of studying hard, finishing school and making long-term plans to attend a university, hardly subversive or partisan material per se. Some of the protesting parents kept their children home so they would not be "forced to watch it."

This brand of populism is not new in American politics but it remains dormant for some periods of time, only to resurface with virulence at times of economic crisis. Neither ideological nor partisan, it is part of the same movement that opposed the first President Bush in the early nineties because of his nonchalant attitude towards the deficit and his support of free trade. It then led to the formation of a third party under Ross Perot. It also led to the infamous bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma perpetrated by Timothy Mc Veigh who is now dead in fulfillment of his subsequent death sentence. These populists are anti-establishment and anti-elite, anti-immigrant and anti-free trade, anti-tax and anti-deficit. They cannot be labeled as conservative or libertarian because of their inner contradictions. They are difficult to organize because central control is what they loathe the most, so a party that decides to channel their frustrations should be wary, since they run the risk of alienating the moderate majorities, while at the same time not gaining consistent support from this unpredictable lot. And these Tea Party (anti-tax)

Patriots are particularly bothered by a black President. They are overwhelmingly white, and tend to be older and less educated than the average American. While their zeal to protect their own privileges and benefits is understandable, their values are incongruous; for example, first among their most cherished benefits is Medicare, a government run program, and yet they are adamantly against any (other) government-run plan. On Sunday these groups loaded up buses and came to the Capitol to protest against the “advent of Socialism” and to celebrate early what they deem will be “Obama’s Waterloo”, namely, his inability to pass health care reform.

They represent the reaction to the brand of pragmatic post-partisan politics Obama purports to embody. It is a fringe group, full of anger, fear and resentment, not in actuality represented by any party’s ideology but used by some cynical politicians to fill the void of leadership and the lack of any serious proposals to offer as alternatives. This populism of the right has historically emerged during times of crisis, and systematically addressed their bile towards immigrants, people of other races or creeds, or whoever they considered outsiders according to their own parochial values and prejudices.

Thankfully, those demagogues that gave them heed over the summer break are not fully representative of the Republican Party, and as of last Sunday, a change in the tone of the opposition has started registering. Some conservative legislators that understand the political dynamics because of their experience or their instincts seem to have realized, perhaps under the directive of party veterans such as Bob Dole and Howard Baker, that the time is ripe for some kind of compromise, especially after the President extended his olive branch by not insisting on a government-run plan. Republicans seem to have realized that they have made their point by obstructing the process long enough, and are signaling a new stance to compromise. Already this past Sunday on Meet the Press Republican Senator John Cronyn of Texas softened his message by saying that there is bipartisan agreement over 80% of the bill. He expects reform legislation to pass if Democrats affirm their commitment not to undermine private insurance companies by “dropping their insistence on a public option.” The compromise seems to pivot around the notion of a “trigger” mechanism by which, after five years, if the implemented legislation has failed to control costs and extend coverage, then the government-run plan would be introduced. This trigger option is meant to appease the

liberals to the left of the President, while at the same time get the vote of a few Republicans, among them Olympia Snowe of Maine, at present the most sought-after person in the Senate. A moderate and a problem-solver, Snowe has been working very hard for a bipartisan solution and has remained appalled at her own party's extreme behavior during the last few months. Harking from Maine, the only state in the North East that still elects Republicans to Congress, she is one of the few remaining deal-makers in the Senate, a breed that seems bound to become extinct after the passing of Senator Ted Kennedy and the retiring of Bob Dole and Howard Baker.

The issue will be decided in the next two months. One of the most quoted statements of Obama's speech before Congress was that six presidents before him had tried health care reform but that he was "*determined to be the last.*" It is clear Obama is ready to spend every penny of his political capital on health care reform. It is still too early to doubt the President's judgment, but his may well be a pyrrhic victory. In pursuing his brand of cold consensus at all cost and trying to bring all stakeholders (special interest groups on the right and left of the debate, namely, insurance and pharmaceutical industries and labor unions) to the table, Obama may have undermined his own effort at reform. Coming on the heels of the stimulus package, and the bailouts of the financial system and automakers, the health care debate this time more than ever, has focused people's attention on government's intrusions in their lives. The government has become the biggest lender, insurer, automaker and guarantor of investment risk. Government spending accounts for 26% of the economy a bigger share than at any time since WWII. An eloquent and very capable leader with an undeniable mandate and majority in both Houses is expected to deliver. The big irony is that *populist* opposition to his plan has succeeded in stirring the unease of a nation already in the grip of anxiety due to the recession, and has made him inclined to drop the most *populist* of his proposals, namely, the public option. But will his pragmatism succeed or is it already doomed by the typical Washington deadlock?

By trying to make every group happy the President is seeing his public support slip away in the polls. There is still time for Obama to recover, use his mandate and his majorities to the full, and insist on a bill that brings about real reform and not a mere extension of the system we have today.

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