



THE VIEW

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TALK OF PUBLIC OPTIONS AND THE NANNY STATE

BY
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Sunday evening, March 21, 2010 was consumed by the concluding episodes of the long battle over health care reform. Indeed it was the Super Bowl for policy wonks. The immediate thought that came to mind while watching the television flashes back and forth among the 24-hour news channels was that we are two separate nations living among each other. Perusal of the day's news columns and lap after lap past the Sunday news talk shows clearly demonstrates that such is the case.

While debate over health care legislation is the topic of the moment there is ample evidence that we intend to avoid agreeing with each other as much as possible. Both sides appear intent on making the gap that divides us wider and deeper than it already is. The philosophical disparities are beginning to permeate every aspect and every level of American life. The point of departure for these differences is obviously the question of what role the government should play in our lives. While this is obviously not a new question, now we have so many more ways of knowing what the other side is thinking, and we are given a daily smorgasbord of reasons to choose from on why we do not like what we are hearing.

For example, in the health care debate, there is the much talked about concept called the "Public Option." It is a mechanism which would enable the government to offer a government funded and administered health insurance plan to those who have been rejected by the private sector for coverage. Conservative lawmakers consider the Public Option as the ultimate affront to the sanctity of the free market economy. On the other hand, those at the other end of the political spectrum, acceptably referred to as "progressives," view this as government's way of accomplishing what the private sector refuses to do – insuring those that private companies refuse. History provides us with the example of the Tennessee Valley Authority that brought electrical power to the Tennessee Valley when the private sector was unable to do so. Even today there are detractors who view this public option

provision of electricity as an unfair and expensive intrusion of government into the private sector while others give thanks for the day electricity came to the valley.

Those on the right liberally use “socialist” and “communist” terminology to describe in harshest terms those on the left who respond with their characterizations of the right as immoral and insensitive of those left behind by the free market system. In the process, when the question is asked of conservatives, “What will you propose that we do with the nearly 50 million uninsured Americans?” the answer is usually one that avoids a solution, but rather turns to issues of cost. Conversely, when the left asks the right how they propose to cover what they claim will be the enormous costs of extending health care to the bulk of the uninsured there is admitted uncertainty as to the ultimate price tag. Both sides leave the listener quite unfulfilled. In arriving at this impasse each side simply does not accept the premise of the other. This same entrenchment is reaching into every facet of public life.

In fact, this very day I was told by an acquaintance who had attended morning services at a different church from my own that the minister in a prominent Mississippi pulpit asked the Lord in his morning prayer to guide our lawmakers to reject health care reform legislation. Several studies have recently pointed out the steady decline in the proportion of the American population attending mainline protestant churches. One set of theories attempting to explain these numbers holds that when churches take sides on the very divisive political and social issues of the day, they tend to divide their congregations into “winners” and “losers.” All too often, the losers feel compelled to find other outlets for worship or cease attending church altogether. Thus, are we witnessing the social and political divide visit us in the very inner sanctums of our communities. Neighbors and those sitting across the table at the Rotary Club are not only becoming deadlocked in their opinions but they are going beyond in labeling old friends as being “on the other side.”

Hopefully, the days of spirited political debate are not over forever. The spirit of community that so many of us enjoy hangs in the balance. The threats to community have been well-documented and they are growing more numerous every day. If we persist in finding ways to build permanent fences between each other we ourselves may become the biggest threat of all. Is there a resolution to the fallout that results when a friend labels a friend a communist for being a Democrat? Likewise, can two friends recover their relationship when one labels the other as immoral and insensitive with little concern for his/her fellow man if he wears a Republican label?

One can only hope that our Democratic system will always be a haven for spirited debate, but that civility will return as the order of the day. Friends are hard to come by and the spirit of community is too important.



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