

The “Lion” Casts a Huge Shadow Over Healthcare Reform Debate

“For all those whose cares have been our concern, the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives and the dream shall never die.”

--- Senator Edward M. Kennedy from his 1980 presidential campaign concession speech

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi wasted no time taking political advantage of the passing of the distinguished U.S. Senator and nonpareil health care reform advocate Edward Kennedy on August 25, 2009: “Ted Kennedy’s dream of quality health care for all Americans will be made real this year because of his leadership and his inspiration” she said in her official statement issued the very next morning.

Congress will go back to work under the looming shadow of the health care reform movement’s lost “lion.” For over 40 years Kennedy pushed for universal health coverage. He narrowly missed achieving his dream more than 35 years ago when he declined an offer from then President Richard Nixon that he would support universal health care if Kennedy would, in turn, support a Nixon program. Kennedy declined; it seemed not generous enough at the time. He never got a second chance. Later he said it was the mistake of his life.

The fact he will never see universal health coverage become a reality is likely to take the increasingly emotional reform debate to new levels of pandemonium. Movement supporters will invoke his memory at every opportunity and their mission will likely take on the aura of a religious crusade. Opponents will have to try to ward off this imagery by reminding us that despite Kennedy’s many virtues as a legislator, he remained in life a frequently divisive “liberal” despised by conservatives, often surrounded by controversy.

How will the end of the Ted Kennedy era factor into the health care debate? Or will it? It is hard to predict. Certainly the movement now has an almost mystical rallying point and source of renewed energy and inspiration. However, it has also lost its staunchest supporter, and, for the time being at least, a crucial vote in the Senate. In the long run, however, we would expect these forces to cancel each other out. Little should change, simply because it is doubtful Americans want to gamble their futures on so critical an issue simply to vindicate the life’s work of one man. Nevertheless, there is now danger that the dialog could, at least for a time, turn from very emotional to completely irrational. Will it turn ugly? We certainly hope not.

Consider these gauges of public belief about what health care reform would mean, as found in a recent national study by scientist Dr. Aaron Carroll, director of Indiana University’s Center for Health Policy and Professionalism Research:

- 67 percent of respondents believe that wait times for health care services, such as surgery, will increase.
- About half believe the federal government will become directly involved in making personal health care decisions
- Roughly six out of 10 Americans believe taxpayers will be required to pay for abortions.
- 46 percent believe reforms will result in health care coverage for all illegal immigrants.
- 54 percent believe the public option will increase premiums for Americans with private health insurance.
- Five of 10 think cuts will be made to Medicare in order to cover more Americans.

The Obama administration insists that these views are nothing more than myths, fostered by the scare tactics of reform’s opponents. If they are indeed myths, however, this perception is the reality that the movement will probably have to change if health care reform is going to become a popular enactment. The president and his movement have lost an ally and gained only a symbol. We strongly suspect the president would much rather still have his ally and will greatly miss his support.

It is too early to speculate on what is going to happen next, especially in light of this monumental development. We will be watching closely for clues on what direction this wide-ranging debate is going to take in the aftermath of the senator’s death. We will be reporting new developments and more observations as they occur. In the meantime, this firm and its entire staff, founded and headquartered in Massachusetts, offers condolences to the family of the late Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy. His life’s work speaks for itself.