

IOWA TRANSPARENCY NEWSLETTER



"We'll have the negotiations televised on C-SPAN..."

by Doug Stout

In 2008 Presidential candidate Barack Obama was full of hopeful rhetoric about changing the political culture in Washington, D.C. He even promised a new era of political transparency when the details of health-care reform were debated. He said "We'll have the negotiations televised on C-SPAN so that people can see who is making arguments on behalf of their constituents, and who are making arguments on behalf of the drug companies or insurance companies."¹ Every honest observer knows that the politics of Washington have not changed at all; whether you like or dislike the President's agenda, there has been no new spirit of transparency to hit our nation's capital. The rhetoric...was "gone with the wind," as soon as the realities of governing sank in, assuming the intentions were ever really there to try to bring about real change in the political quagmire of competing interests that define our nation's capital. If we had "healthcare debate in the sunshine," would the "Cornhusker kickback" (which called for payments which would only benefit the state of Nebraska) in order to assure the vote of Nebraska Senator Ben Nelson (D) ever come to pass? Would there really only be three counties in the entire country where seniors will not have their Medicare Advantage program significantly altered? It is not coincidence that

those three counties are in Florida and were key to getting the vote of Florida Senator Bill Nelson (D). The health-care legislation is so full of special deals and unique provisions that the sponsor should have been Monte Hall, from the old television show "Let's Make a Deal."

The health care reform...or health care revision meetings...(I am not sure "reform" is actually involved in the process) may be the most notable evidence of the lack of transparency in the current Administration, but there are plenty of others to choose from in their conduct. Bret Baier from Fox News recently posted a quote from *Los Angeles Times* reporter Andrew Malcolm talking about the daily schedule for Vice President Joe Biden, which reads: "Today's Biden schedule highlight is a meeting with the chief of transparency for economic recovery. But, unfortunately, the transparency meeting is non-transparent – closed to the press – Which makes it – what? – Secret openness? Open Secrecy?"² Well at the very least the word "ironic" comes to mind...and some would lean more towards the term "hypocritical."

I do not think there is any one reason for the free-fall that President Obama has suffered in the polls since his election, but there is no quicker way to drop in the public eye than to solemnly promise things that you either have no intention of deliver-

ing or find very quickly that you do not have the capability to deliver. I wonder if along with the ongoing recession, President Obama's promise to change the way that politics work in Washington, D.C., and his unwillingness to even expend much effort in that direction have led to the quick disillusionment of the American people. There is a very short time frame during which a leader can be successful solely on the basis that he is "something different" than what came before him, then he or she reaches the point where they are judged based on the expectations they have created. President Obama created great expectations with his soaring rhetoric and has only left disillusion throughout many sectors of the political spectrum since their view of the "hope and change" that was coming has not inspired hope and has often been "change" which has been more negative than constructive. In no area is that more clear than in his stated objective of changing the tone of politics in this country and in making the political process open to the people. It has not happened and the lack of serious effort to even attempt to do so is very clear even to many admirers of the President.

Now with the recent election of Republican Scott Brown to the United States Senate from Massachusetts, filling the seat that was left open when Senator Edward Kennedy

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passed away last year, all political "bets are off." Paul Kirk, who was a friend and aide to Senator Kennedy had been named to fill the seat pending the special election, which Brown won on January 19, 2010.³ Mr. Kirk, a Democrat, had continued to give the Democratic leader 60 probable votes in the United States Senate. There were only 40 Republicans in the Senate and 58 Democrats, but the other two members of the Senate, Joe Lieberman and Bernie Sanders, both caucus with the Democrats in the body.

As you probably know, this is important because of the Senate rules. The Senate is meant to be a deliberative body and the rules require that at least 60 Senators must vote to move to final consideration of legislation before a vote can take place. Therefore, with 41 Senate votes you can prevent legislation from moving to a final vote for passage. The Republican Party members, if they vote together, can now prevent any legislation which they feel would be damaging to the nation from passing the Senate.

However, "the Scott heard round the world," as some pundits labeled the outcome, paraphrasing the famous "shot heard round the world" which started the American War of Independence from Great Britain, has much more significance than just a procedural forty-first vote in the United States Senate, although that alone changes the political dynamic in Washington, D.C. dramatically.

More than the mere number, it is quite probably at least a minor footnote in our nation's history. It is the point where the Obama agenda came to a grinding halt as one of the most solidly Democratic states in the union specifically rejected the personal pleas of their leader, President Obama, in Boston the Sunday before the election, to preserve his agenda and send the Democrat Martha Coakley, who served as the State's Attorney General, to Washington.

You can say that Scott Brown was the better candidate and that he ran a better campaign, both of which are probably accurate in the eyes of most observers in both parties. But, however you try to explain it away, the truth remains the same. An overwhelmingly Democratic state elected a Republican Senator who ran openly on the fact that he opposed the President's health care plans and thought the Democratic leaders in the Administration and in Congress had too much power.

So where do we go from here? There is an old saying that 24 hours is an eternity in politics and that is basically true. It is also true that every indicator right now shows that unless there are big changes in the political environment, the Democratic losses in the November elections will be very, very large. The unspoken rule in politics is that if the political boat is sinking, it quickly becomes "every man and woman for themselves." (There are no "children" in Congress...well perhaps that is a debatable point...but if there were...given the culture there...they would have to fend for themselves as well.) This becomes even more so given the nature of the Democrats top leadership, who appear to be in no position to help embattled Democratic legislators.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid is up for election in 2010, and the polls indicate that if the election was held today, he would have little hope of coming back to Washington, D.C. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi represents a San Francisco district in Congress. It is a district that even Scott Brown could probably not take away from her, but no one has ever said "as San Francisco goes...so goes the nation." Vice President Biden may have found that "undisclosed location" that they were always saying Vice President Cheney was staying in, because he has not been making many headlines lately. Besides, if former President Bill Clinton, the

other current Massachusetts United States Senator John Kerry, and even the President of the United States can't save a Democrat in Massachusetts from defeat, who can?

Since there is currently a shortage of superheroes available to fill that gap, it is a not so rhetorical question being asked behind closed doors in almost every Democrat Senate and House of Representative office in our nation's capitol. The answer from the senior staff, the trusted political councils, and probably from the Member's spouse is going to be that "we are on our own." The ramifications of that are hard to fully appreciate. The bottom line is...that if there is no one to save us if we get into trouble, we sure as heck better not get into trouble in the first place...and if we are currently in trouble, we have less than ten months to get ourselves out of it. This lesson is also not lost on the opposition side of the fence. In politics, the sharks are always circling, internally within your own political party and externally as well. Believe me when I say, if the seat formerly held by Senator Kennedy goes down in Massachusetts, with the President of the United States and the deceased Senator's wife doing everything they can to stop the wave from cresting, there is no seat that can't be contested. The "blood is in the water," and the President's political agenda is now secondary to the political "survival" strategies being drawn up behind each of those closed Democratic doors.

Now they may decide that their best strategy is to "get something done," and the President had better hope so. In the immortal words of Ben Franklin during the American Revolution, "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."⁴ If I were Nancy Pelosi, that would be my mantra to her Democratic caucus, but in the modern age, where a candidate for the most part raises his or her own money, runs their own ads, and forms their own alliances, I am not

sure the party will hold. It may be a more coherent strategy to say that they are all scoundrels in Washington, D.C. except for me, your beloved hometown Congressman. "I just can't for the life of me understand what the 'Speaker', 'The President,' or any or all of those other rascals and politicians are thinking." If that does not sound noble, there is a good reason that President Harry Truman was known as being plain spoken and there is a very good reason why he famously said: "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog."⁵

This is not to say that the country is going to come to a grinding halt. What it does mean is that the President will have to convince a majority of the country that he has a good policy initiative before going forward with it. So far the Administration strategy has seemed to "put the cart before the horse." If you have the power that comes with high poll ratings and clout, you can convince your allies in Congress of the value of the legislation and never bother to find out...if a majority of their constituents are on board with you. You are now going to have a lot of Democrat elected officials that are going to tell the Administration that if they want their support for a piece of legislation they are going to have to sell it publicly first. "Tell them why it is good for the country...don't tell me. If you can convince my constituents it is a good idea, I will be happy to support it...but if not...forget it."

This may not be political leadership by members of Congress, but I think it is a very big step in the right direction compared to the last year. One of the most valued domestic assets the President has is the "bully pulpit." He should use it to build a public consensus...not to tell the public that they should trust Congress and the Administration to do what is best for them. If those days ever really existed, they are long since a thing of the past in these days of 24-hour mass communication. While he

is contemplating new approaches, the President might want to get over the whole "George Bush ate my homework" excuse. Whether or not the policies of past administrations have contributed to our current situation is not relevant any more. If he can't come up with solutions to improve the situation we are in, move out of the way, there are other Members of both parties who would be glad to have the opportunity.

The media needs to understand that they need to do a lot of work to regain their credibility. The people of Massachusetts proved that while they may be liberals and they certainly are mostly Democrats, they know that the current style of leadership by Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Reid is no way to run the American government. President Obama promised transparency and promised a new way of governing. It is a little late to start now, but better late than never. If he still doesn't comply, the network news should start their broadcasts by pointing out "the Emperor has no clothes" on the issue.

The President might start by emptying his Administration of ideological campaign operatives and replacing them with pragmatic policy administrators...from both parties. Did you forget about that promise...to fill his Administration with qualified people from both parties and all sectors of American life? He should realize that the President and his policies are legitimate lightning rods for criticism and explain his agenda to the watchers of Fox News as well as MSNBC, and if he wants to exchange barbs with Fox political commentators, he should go after some of the obnoxious commentators on the liberal spectrum like Keith Olbermann, who said on the air at MSNBC on January 18: "In Scott Brown we have an irresponsible, homophobic, racist, reactionary, ex-nude model, teabagging supporter of violence against woman and against politicians with whom he disagrees."⁶ Really – what

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say you President Obama? Is Mr. Olbermann wrong, or are the people of Massachusetts, the overwhelmingly Democratic voters of Massachusetts wrong? If you are going to call for a new style of politics, and if you are going to lead the entire nation, you need to confront poisonous venom from all points of the political spectrum and label it for what it is...unacceptable. Where is your new style of politics? Where is the President of all the American people, including those who choose to watch Fox News? We expected more Mr. President...you promised more Mr. President.

On the Iowa front, the news on the credibility of Governor Culver and his statements on the budget are not very good either. In urging the passage of his borrowing scheme to finance current projects with our children's tax dollars, the Governor had claimed the borrowed money would create "21,000 to 30,000 jobs." On January 15, the Governor

changed his tune and trimmed that estimate. He now says the borrowing scheme, which will take 25 years to pay back and burden Iowans with hundreds of millions of dollars in interest payments will create "hopefully hundreds, if not thousands" of jobs.⁷ So if we pick a fair number, based on his recent quote, 830 new jobs would seem to be generous to him. That also happens to be the amount, \$830 million, that we borrowed, not counting the substantial interest on the bonds we will have to pay back as well. Let's see...doing the math...moving the zeros...I guess that comes out to borrowing \$1,000,000 per job created. These are temporary jobs, which normally only last until the project is completed. So why again is it called the "I-Jobs" program, and why is the Governor still telling people it was his number one priority in the last legislative session? I expect most Iowans can recognize a bad investment of the next 25 years of their tax dollars when

they see one. We can only hope that the rest of the year brings a more transparent political environment.

(Endnotes)

¹David Corn, "President Obama, Where Are Those C-SPAN Cameras?" *Politics Daily*, August 7, 2009, <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2009/08/07/president-obama-where-are-those-c-span-cameras/> (January 18, 2010).

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⁵President Harry S. Truman, http://thinkexist.com/quotation/if_you_want_a_friend_in_washington-get_a/193651.html (January 21, 2010).

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⁷Tom Beaumont, "Culver cuts job estimate for I-JOBS program," *Des Moines Register Staff Blogs*, January 16, 2010, <http://blogs.desmoinesregister.com/dmr/index.php/2010/01/16/culver-cuts-job-estimate-for-i-jobs-program/> (January 18, 2010).