

Tipping point on distrust

The Washington Times

Tuesday, September 29, 2009

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The visceral reaction members of Congress faced in town-hall meetings during summer recess, followed by the huge Sept. 12 turnout of concerned citizens in Washington suggest the political center in America has fundamentally changed.

It is not just that the current approach to health care reform is deeply flawed. The whole legislative process has become corrupted in ways that are impenetrable, hasty and irresponsible - oblivious to past mistakes and divorced from common sense and any sense of fiscal responsibility.

A tipping point has been reached between Washington elites and a wide swath of the American people who now distrust a government whose actions would effect an irretrievable loss of fundamental freedoms and encumber future generations with crushing debt.

It is understandable that the framework for the Obama administration's reform is collectivism. Collectivist programs claim to have a moral basis of serving a greater good. In practice, they become levers of raw political power to mobilize interest groups and classes for causes and votes.

But collectivism that works so effectively in political organizing fails dismally in economics. Collectivism forces people to conform to groups and forgo independent initiative even though it is individuals who respond to incentives and make economic decisions. Collectivist reforms cannot work because they preclude personal responsibility in decision-making, which is the key driver for markets to contain costs and allocate resources efficiently.

In fact, collectivist government intervention can be catastrophic when imposed on a national level. A major contributing factor for the failure of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and the financial turmoil that led us to the brink was politicization and socialization of mortgage underwriting, which created a false sense of security,

abrogated market signals, prevented the rational calculation and pricing of risk and contributed to blurring the lines of right and wrong. We cannot afford another such experiment with the health care sector, which is 17 percent of U.S. gross domestic product.

The division in our country wasn't always this way. When President Kennedy gave his Inaugural address in 1961 invoking people to "ask not what your country can do for you; but rather ask what you can do for your country," he was suggesting that Americans think and act by taking personal responsibility and not depend on government.

That attitude of relying on personal responsibility has been a core value in our country from its very beginning. Over the past 45 years, however, personal responsibility has been increasingly marginalized by more collectivist government policies. And this has been happening within the United States in the face of collectivism failing in every society across all cultures where it has been adopted.

In its extreme form, collectivism failed in the Soviet Union as it did in China, with devastating consequences and loss of human life - nearly 40 million in the Soviet Union and a greater number in China. Its lesser forms also have had serious consequences.

A chief factor in failing public schools and the downfall of many U.S. companies and industries has been the collective actions taken by unions. In Europe, collectivist policies have so weakened the moral fabric of once proud peoples that they are more concerned about their narcissistic social benefits than they are willing to make sacrifices necessary to defend themselves against threats to their very existence, such as terrorism.

Today, 48 years after Mr. Kennedy's address and 30 years since it abandoned collectivism, China has lower income tax rates, a huge trade surplus and a significantly higher economic growth rate than the United States.

The Chinese have come to understand the symbiotic relationship between individual initiative, personal responsibility and prosperity, but few U.S. politicians of either party speak in these straightforward terms anymore.

It is not just that our government is bailing out failed institutions at an unprecedented rate. It is that on almost every major front of reform, individual responsibility and the attendant moral underpinnings of free choice are being subordinated to an increased role of the state, which fosters a collectivist-entitlement mentality.

Health care reform that entails more collectivist public-sector involvement would fail because it invariably would replace choice with a one-size-fits-all approach characteristic of all government-run programs. It would undermine the free-market mechanisms that provide the adaptability, innovation, excellence and, if the proper administrative processes were put in place, the pricing and cost containment that clearly are needed.

It is ludicrous to spend additional hundreds of billions of dollars for supposed health care reform that would limit options and create the largest U.S. government bureaucracy ever while ignoring the reasons behind the insolvency of Medicare and Medicaid.

The fact that a chief driver of skyrocketing costs - abusive medical malpractice lawsuits - is still off-limits in the current House reform bill reveals the flawed and disingenuous nature of this exercise.

With bills so laden with earmarks that they often exceed 1,000 pages that few members of Congress read, the legislative process is fundamentally corrupt, just as our federal bureaucracies are out of control.

More bureaucracy, greater dependency, higher taxes, more debt, fewer choices, lower quality. Get real. Fool us once with the stimulus plan, shame on us. Try to fool us twice, shame on our political leaders.

This is less about reform and more about collectivist political power to redistribute wealth, expand federal government control, weaken individual and states' rights and create a permanent power base through entitlements and dependency.

It is time to take the first step in restoring the primacy of personal choice and responsibility. It is time to bring Washington elites to their senses and say "no" to forcing passage of unpopular measures and "yes" to we the people who want real reform.

That reform must draw less on government and more on the heritage of our free institutions, which are the only guarantee of cost containment and the right to choose among quality options.

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