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Newspaper Columns

A Bad Bill and How We Got It

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As current federal health-care legislation moves forward toward law, we need to draw several lessons from events of the last weeks and months:

First, the bill passed by the House on March 21 is a failure of decent lawmaking. It has not been “fixed.” It remains unethical and defective on all of the issues pressed by the U.S. bishops and pro-life groups for the past seven months.

Second, the Executive Order promised by the White House to ban the use of federal funds for abortion does *not* solve the many problems with the bill, which is why the bishops did not -- and still do not -- see it as a real solution. Executive Orders can be rescinded or reinterpreted at any time. Some current congressional leaders have already shown a pattern of evasion, ill will and obstinacy on the moral issues involved in this legislation, and the track record of the White House in keeping its promises regarding abortion-related issues does not inspire confidence. The fact that congressional leaders granted this one modest and inadequate concession only at the last moment, and *only* to force the passage of this deeply flawed bill, should give no one comfort.

Third, the combination of pressure and disinformation used to break the pro-life witness on this bill among Democratic members of Congress -- despite the strong resistance to this legislation that continues among American voters -- should put an end to any talk by Washington leaders about serving the common good or seeking common ground. Words need actions to give them flesh. At many points over the past seven months, congressional leaders could have resolved the serious moral issues inherent in this legislation. They did not. No shower of reassuring words now can wash away that fact.

Fourth, self-described “Catholic” groups have done a serious disservice to justice, to the Church, and to the ethical needs of the American people by undercutting the leadership and witness of their own bishops. For groups like Catholics United, this is unsurprising. In their effect, if not in formal intent, such groups exist to advance the interests of a particular political spectrum. Nor is it newsworthy from an organization like Network, which -- whatever the nature of its good work -- has rarely shown much enthusiasm for a definition of “social justice” that includes the rights of the unborn child.

But the actions of the Catholic Health Association (CHA) in providing a deliberate public counter-message to the bishops were both surprising and profoundly disappointing; and also genuinely damaging. In the crucial final days of debate on health-care legislation, CHA lobbyists worked directly *against* the efforts of the American bishops in their approach to members of Congress. The bad law we now likely face, we owe in part to the efforts of the Catholic Health Association and similar “Catholic” organizations.

Here in Colorado, many thousands of ordinary, faithful Catholics, from both political parties, have worked hard over the past seven months to advance sensible, legitimate health-care reform; the kind that serves the poor *and* protects the rights of the unborn child, *and* immigrants, *and* the freedom of conscience rights of health-care professionals and institutions. If that effort seems to have failed, faithful Catholics don’t bear the blame. That responsibility lies elsewhere. I’m grateful to everyone in the archdiocese who has worked so hard on this issue out of love for God’s people and fidelity to their Catholic faith. Come good or bad, that kind of effort is never wasted.