

The Public Option and Abortion

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 8, 2009 NCR Today

NBC News just reported that only thirty Senate Democrats signed a letter to their leadership demanding a public option in the final health care reform bill. The leadership then signed a letter addressed to themselves to bring the number to thirty-six. The public option is pretty well dead when Democrats can scarcely get a majority of their own caucus for the measure.

I do not want to suggest that the pastoral letter of Bishop Nickliss, which was quoted in the New York Times, nor the joint pastoral letter from Archbishop Naumann and Bishop Finn, were decisive in killing the public option, although their worries about "socialized medicine" did not help. I do wish to suggest the irony. Just when legislators and the administration were reaching agreement on the fact that the public option would not cover abortion, the public option is done in because no one stood up for it. Keeping abortion coverage out of private plans that merely receive subsidies will be nearly impossible to achieve: Whether we like it or not, abortion is legal and insurance companies are free to offer plans that cover it. Now, the best chance to present an affordable alternative that does not cover abortion, the public option, is apparently dead.

I hope that in conference committee, the House will push for a public option with a trigger rather than adopting the co-op route. Under a trigger, if the market does not produce certain savings in, say, three years, the public option would come on line. It will be much more difficult to keep abortion funding out of a co-op.

If memory serves, during last year's election, some of the more conservative bishops consistently argued that abortion was the most important issue, that it trumped all others, even though there was not much practical difference between Mr. Obama and Mr. McCain on the issue. Now, those same conservative bishops have been part of an effort to scuttle what was the best way to limit funding of abortion in health care reform. Sometimes irony is funny but not this time.

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