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Bishops to the Rescue

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According to a report in Politico.com, the USCCB is willing to help ensure that enough Senators will vote to allow a rules change that would permit the reconciliation process to address the issue of abortion funding in health care reform. The vote would require 60 votes in the now no-longer filibuster-proof Senate. They may not realize it, but the USCCB is calling the Republicans out.

It is increasingly clear that Speaker Nancy Pelosi will need the votes of twelve or so members of the House that insist on the language contained in the Stupak Amendment. That amendment was part of the bill that passed the House last year but it was not passed in the Senate. The House is set to pass the Senate bill but only if certain changes are made which, in turn, would be sent to the Senate under reconciliation rules that only require a simple majority. The GOP opposes the use of the reconciliation process but it is perfectly permissible under Senate rules as the Republicans well know, having used the procedure many times in the past.

A further point must be made about the reconciliation process. It is not being used to ram through the health care reform bill. That legislation passed the Senate with 60 votes on Christmas Eve. The House is prepared to pass the Senate bill. That is how laws are made. The reconciliation process will only be used to amend those aspects of the law that pertain to budgetary issues, such as how the health care reform is funded. Abortion restrictions cannot be passed through reconciliation, which has heretofore been the sticking point.

The USCCB is being true to its original position: It wants health care reform provided its concerns on abortion are met. It also raised other issues, such as the provisions regarding immigrants, but it appears the USCCB has rightly come to understand that even a matter of such grave concern should not be allowed to stand in the way of passing health care reform. As well, the upcoming debate on immigration

reform should be able to address concerns about excluding immigrants from the health care changes. And, because the vote in the Senate on allowing the change in abortion coverage would be a distinct vote, it would be hard for a pro-life Republican to justify voting against it. This was the dynamic before the House vote: House Republicans wanted to torpedo the Stupak Amendment as a way to make the underlying health care bill unpassable, but pressure from the bishops guaranteed that pro-life Republicans would support the Stupak Amendment. They will try and repeat that magic in the Senate.

Lastly, it is important to note that the only reason the bishops are in a position to influence the deliberations in either chamber is because they have been steadfast in their support for health care reform. Otherwise, they would be standing on the sidelines. Those conservative critics of health care reform can find what sanction for their criticisms they can muster in their own arguments ? and it is the strength of democracy that we encourage such arguments ? but they cannot look to the Catholic bishops for support.

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