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Blue Dogs to the Rescue?

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

As the budget stalemate continues and the prospect of a government shutdown looms, moderate Democrats, known as Blue Dogs, are getting a lot of attention from the leadership of the GOP in the House, as detailed in a front page story in this morning's *Washington Post*. The Blue Dogs sit in the center of the electorate and, if they survived last year's shellacking, they are pretty well settled into their careers, unless redistricting alters the mix.

The GOP leadership in the House is flirting with the Blue Dogs because it knows it may need a few Democratic votes to pass a continuing resolution for this fiscal year, as well as the necessary vote to raise the debt ceiling to avoid the shutdown. The leadership knows that, historically, a government shutdown makes all members of Congress look bad, it makes it look like the leadership can't get anything accomplished, and the already dismal congressional approval numbers get even worse. So, the leaders want to avoid it. The problem is that there are enough new members of the House majority that do not really owe their seats to the leadership or to any official party organ. They got here by self-funding their campaigns or by riding the wave of Tea Party activism to Congress. And they seem highly disinclined to compromise.

The House Republicans have a 241 seat majority which permits them to lose 23 votes on any given measure. But, the last vote on a three week continuing resolution, taken on March 15, only received 186 Republican votes. It passed because 85 Democrats also supported the measure. In theory, at least, this is how government is supposed to work, indeed, such bipartisan cooperation seemed to be exactly what many voters wanted when they went to the polls last November.

Blue Dogs are accustomed to compromise and, in a legislature, compromise cannot be a bad word. Compromise is always a relative term, which is not to say that congressional compromises will serve as

an instance of the dictatorship of relativism! Quite the contrary. Because in addition to whatever ideological commitments candidates made during their campaigns, they have now taken a solemn oath to govern, and govern they must. Legislators must learn to work with, listen to, perhaps even learn from those with whom they generally disagree. They must seek common ground. They must learn that while there are some things that must never be compromised, those things are very few, that half a loaf is better than none, that Rome was not built, nor unbuilt, in a day.

There is a caveat, however. Blue Dogs, who tend to come from swing districts, many in the South or Appalachian North, have been willing to bolt from the Democratic Party's leadership and reach compromises with Republicans in the past. For example, some of the Blue Dogs are pro-life such as Cong. Joe Donnelly of Indiana and Heath Shuler of North Carolina. I hope that when the negotiations get down to details, if it comes to a choice between funding anti-poverty programs and funding Planned Parenthood, these Blue Dogs will throw Planned Parenthood under the bus and retain the funding for anti-poverty efforts. I hope that if it comes down to a choice between cutting WIC and cutting NPR, these moderate Democrats will recognize that the poor people who rely on WIC have nowhere to turn to, but NPR has wealthy donors who can make up the difference. I hope that if it comes down to a choice, the Blue Dogs will insist that funding for programs to combat malaria in Africa, which cost so little and achieve so much, will be kept and funding for even worthwhile programs be cut instead. I am all for funding high speed rail, but if it comes down to high speed rail or anti-malaria programs in Africa, we can wait on the high speed rail.

The Blue Dogs, however, must begin to set down their markers and to exact a price for their willingness to help out the GOP. This is why the Democratic leadership, especially the President, needs to sit down with them and discuss a strategy. Both for the looming shutdown and for next year's election, Democrats will need to articulate what they are unwilling to cut. I would submit that allowing the government to shutdown because of cuts in funding for Planned Parenthood or NPR would not paint the Democrats in the most favorable light. However, allowing the government to shutdown because they will not agree to cuts that harm those who are seeking to climb out of the lower class and into the middle, that can be seen as defending the American Dream. Giving a hand-up and, yes, sometimes when times are tough, also giving a hand-out, is not un-American. And, in the larger debate ahead on next year's budget, the Democrats must insist that there be no cuts in Social Security or Medicare until our tax structure is overhauled and companies like GE pay their fair share in taxes.

It is the challenge of the Blue Dogs to resist the ideological temptation the old Democratic Leadership Council succumbed to: The DLC crowd stuck with the social liberalism of the left and abandoned the economic liberalism of the left. The Blue Dogs have already, largely, stuck to their guns on some of the more prominent social issues: They are pro-life on abortion, they support Second Amendment Rights (I wish they didn't but, hell, you can only fight so many losing battles in one life), they do not want to run an endgame to achieve federal recognition of gay marriage, etc. The Blue Dogs should break with the GOP on its current fetish for tax cuts for the super-rich, recalling the days when there were true fiscal conservatives in the GOP, conservatives devoted to balanced budgets and not to voodoo economics. And they should also break with the GOP on its anti-immigrant nativism.

Of course, being in the center means you not only get courted from both sides, you also get attacked from both sides. Being a Blue Dog must be interesting and I am mindful of the ancient Chinese curse: May you live in interesting times. But, if they actually reflect the values of the centrist, working class voters who sent them to Washington, the Blue Dogs can help secure a budget that the country can live with. That is a large goal, and it will take some very interesting days of negotiations to get there.

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