NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Boehner's Burden

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 12, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The House of Representatives came back into session on Monday. It took all of three days for the fact to emerge that the chamber is ungovernable. Yesterday, Speaker John Boehner was forced to push back a vote on the federal budget because he does not have the votes to pass it.

Boehner and the GOP leadership unveiled a plan that has proven incapable of securing a majority vote and it is far from clear how he can cobble together a coalition to pass anything at this point. The inability of the House leadership and President Obama to reach a grand bargain on the budget, and there was a deal to be had, created this mess, so no tears for Boehner.

The Speaker?s proposal keeps all the current cuts required by sequestration, which went into effect March 1. In current GOP thinking, bad budget cuts are better than no budget cuts at all. But, these cuts deprive Boehner of securing the votes of any Democrats for his proposal. With deficit projections falling faster than anticipated, Democrats are in no mood to slash further, even though I think they could secure a large amount of political capital if they were to take the lead in cobbling together a series of budget cuts that would protect core programs but cut some of the fat out of the federal budget.

In response to the desires of many members to defund Obamcare, Boehner included a provision that would force the Senate to vote on the health care law. Republicans, all Republicans, should see the value of this politically: The Democrats have still not figured out how to defend the controversial law to their constituents. This is primarily the fault of President of Obama and HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. There is still no ?poster child? for the law, no five year old with a pre-existing condition who could not secure health insurance before but was able to secure it because of the reforms. As I have noted before, the case of increased AIDS funding became politically viable when the entire country met Ryan White, a young man dying from the disease. Obamacare needed a Ryan White. The Democrats still have not figured this out.

The Boehner proposal also would avoid a government shutdown, at least for a few more months. If the Senate voted not to defund Obamcare, the underlying bill would not be sent back to the House but would go immediately to the President for his signature. A government shutdown would hurt the Republicans more than the Democrats no matter how you cut it and no amount of appearances on Fox News will change that calibration. The American people know that the GOP is the anti-government party and that Democrats, generally, like big government. So, no matter the immediate trigger of a shutdown, the GOP will get blamed.

The Insanity Caucus of the House GOP, aka the Tea Party Caucus, is not happy with Boehner?s proposal, and enough of them indicated they would not support it that the Speaker had to postpone a vote. I hold the Insanity Caucus in very low regard, but even I have been surprised at the venom they have directed at Boehner. Matt Kibbe, the President of the Tea Party group Freedom-Works, sent an email to supporters this week that stated: ?First Boehner betrayed us by supporting Obama?s war in Syria. Now he wants to trick you into supporting ObamaCare. Boehner is jumping through hoops to help Barack Obama and betray the American people.?

Betrayal is such an ugly word, it speaks to a deeper revulsion than mere political opposition, and Kibbe managed to use it twice in one email. The inimitable Texas Sen. Ted Cruz also strongly criticized Boehner?s plan, tell a rally, ?If House republicans go along with this strategy, they will be complicit in that disaster that is Obamacare.? Complicit!

In one regard, the Insanity Caucus is right: Once the availability of subsidies for the poor and working poor to purchase health care kick in, there will be no way to roll back the law. Ask those who have tried to alter Social Security or Medicare over the years. Once the people get the goodies, they do not want anyone taking them away. The President likes to say that good policy is always good politics, and he is wrong about that or he would already have congressional authorization to strike Syria. But, in this one instance, the maxim is true: Helping poor folk buy health insurance is both good policy and good politics.

The deepest cause of the looming budget crisis is the process by which our nation continues to redistrict congressional seats after each census. The lines are drawn, by both parties, in such a way that almost every congressional district is reliably red or reliably blue, incumbents are virtually guaranteed a victory come November, and the only way they can lose is in a primary challenge. Because primaries are notoriously low turnout affairs, the power of the zealots in either party to dominate them is as obvious as it is injurious. There are precious few districts in which a pro-life Democrat can win a primary too.

The immediate, and related, cause of the dysfunction in the House is, ironically, Obamacare or, better to say, the politics of Obamacare. The controversial measure caused a GOP landslide in 2010 precisely because, as noted above, Democrats did not know how to defend the law or were unwilling to do so. Their campaign ads rarely even mentioned it, and once it was passed, the President stopped speaking about it. So, the general public learned about Obamacare from Fox News and the GOP. No wonder they did not like it.

In 2010, it was not so much the loss of so many House seats that led to the current impasse, but the loss of so many state legislatures and governor?s mansions. 2010 was a census year as well as an election year and so in purple states like Pennsylvania and Florida, Republicans could draw the congressional maps as they wished. The backlash against Obamacare swept them into office and they used their power to draw district lines that have, in turn, created the vary situation that now makes their congressional majority ungovernable. One is reminded of the old adage: Be careful what you wish for.

The Washington Post, this morning, observed that a Government shutdown is a potential loser for both the President and for House Republicans. They cited a new CNN poll that said a third of voters would blame Obama for a shutdown and 51% would blame the House Republicans. This is dumb analysis: A third of the American electorate will blame Obama if it rains.

Like Syria, Boehner has no good options right now. It is difficult to see how he proceeds. If her were to try to entice some moderate Democrats to vote for a budget package, he would probably lose the rest of his own caucus. The best option may be the biggest option, to sit down with the White House again and try to reach a grand bargain. Short of that, I suspect no matter how hard he tries, Boehner will not be able to prevent a government shutdown.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/28/2017 - 01:35*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/boehners-burden