

“What will health care reform look like?”, The South Bend Tribune, October 22, 2009, Section A, p. 7.

President Obama reminded a lot of voters on September 9th, during his speech to a joint session of Congress on health care reform, why they voted for him last November. It may well be too late, but it wasn't too little. For the first time, more or less, the president spelled out what he wanted in his health care legislation. His speech restored some dignity and power to the subject, despite the summer's carnival sideshow that has been sweeping the nation's airwaves, the bogus fears of death panels and socialism for all. Thus far, it's only been socialism for Wall Street, but that hasn't been the message of Rupert Murdoch's many media outlets and the right-wing radio talk show megaphone.

Indeed, that clownish aspect did rear its head during the president's speech: Joe Wilson, a Republican representative from South Carolina, shouted out “You lie” at the president. Locally, Mark Souder, the Republican congressman from the 3rd district of Indiana, echoed Wilson after the speech, calling the president's address “fundamentally dishonest.” They are the voices parroting the right wing's fringe.

President Obama did describe the role of the public option as a safety net, to be part of an insurance exchange, not, in his version, to be employed for four years and then only available to the uninsured. I, and other proponents of reform, would like the public option to be much larger. But for the perennial opponents of any form of government involvement in health insurance for the nation, even this small part is too much. The same forces were against Medicare a half century ago, shouting the same slogans. Back then, one idea, one I favor, had been to cover children up to the age 18, as well as the old. But the young got thrown to the wolves by the time Medicare was signed into law in 1965. Now, even with Medicaid and other government programs, nearly 10% of our country's children are left uninsured.

Instead, President Obama is sticking to his revenue-neutral payment plan for his version of reform. He pledged he would not sign any bill if it adds “one dime to the deficit.” LBJ, in the 1960s, down played as much as possible how much Medicare would cost in order to get it passed. How to pay for an enlargement of Medicare? We could ask donations from Wall Street firms and banks who have been given our millions. Or President Obama could insert a one percent surtax on everyone making over \$250,000 a year. That would keep him within his campaign pledges.

Or, he could increase the Medicare payroll tax a half percent, to 1.95, from the current 1.45. Most Americans, except the die-hard anti-tax crowd, would pay a small amount of tax where the benefit is immediately realized. Now, with Medicare, you have to get to your mid sixties to reap the benefits. Imagine if workers saw all the country's children immediately covered by a small raise in taxes. There's a tax that wouldn't seem so pie-in-the-sky.

But such reforms, doubtless, are pie in the sky. And, given the virulent minority opposition to even the middle-of-the-road reforms President Obama proposes for the health care system, they too may well

end up pie in the sky. The president's health care speech was certainly memorable; we will now see if it was effective.