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Reprint from Volume 21 Number 19

Sept 24, 2009

## **Editorial: Health Care & National Personality**

Americans live in fear of the financial penalties that their health care system imposes on the sick and the injured, and this may well condition them to the rule by fear that is a dominant characteristic of US politics.

With his message of hope, President Obama is attempting to change cultural patterns that go back to the birth of the nation.

That shouting we hear recently across the world's longest now defended border is supposed to be all about health care. Canadians can be forgiven if we cannot understand what should be so controversial about ensuring that every American has access to care should (s)he get sick, or injured, or just plain old. But what is so curious about this is that Obama has taken on, in fact, a political issue of the most fundamental kind; a cultural issue that goes to the very heart of the US nation.

### **Differences**

Canadians are often asked how we are different from Americans. This is a question that we find difficult to answer; there are more similarities than differences. We do think we are a bit more polite. And we know we have a government-provided universal health care. No Canadian would pretend that our system was perfect, but most of us would claim it was better (we live a couple of years longer) and certainly cheaper than the US system.

The provision of health care is a strange way to distinguish between societies, but it's at least easy to define.

A more fundamental difference may be found in the purposes, the *raison d'être* of our nations. In the US, it's 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'; in Canada, it's 'peace, order, and good government'. Both, in the current jargon, could be termed aspirational goals, which means that we are still trying to achieve them. Notice that while the Canadian version doesn't mention happiness, or indeed the pursuit of anything, the US version doesn't mention government, nor does it guarantee that happiness will be found.

Taking the definitions a bit further, the Canadian version promises security—a warm logfire and double glazing when it's forty below outside—the US version promises adventure, and the freedom to take risks.

### **Risk**

For all but the most well-off US families, the most omnipresent risk in life is to health, and it is the US health care system,

mainly configured as a profit-making enterprise, which draws such a close relationship between health and money. It is difficult to obtain reliable comparative costs of health care per capita between the US and Canada but some calculations put the US figure as high 80% more.

The US additional cost represents profits made by the providers, the institutions, the drug companies, and the insurance companies who are engaged in the business of health care. And since most Americans carry some form of health insurance, these premiums, no matter who pays them, significantly impact the employer's bottom line or the family budget.

Herein lie many fears: that the premiums are unaffordable; that they will rise, particularly if a claim is made; or that coverage may be denied or withdrawn. These fears add to the natural human worries about illness or injury.

For some forty million Americans who cannot afford, or are not eligible for, health insurance, even minor illness or injury can be catastrophic. These are the people that President Obama is trying to bring into the health insurance system; they are the most fearful, not merely of illness, but of doctors, hospitals, and druggists.

For most people, daily life contains many very small chances of massive catastrophe, like being hit by a bus but the resulting fear may be all out of proportion to any intuitive calculation of risk.

### **Fear Versus Hope**

That fear also characterizes much of US political discourse. Particularly over the past ten years, Americans have become increasingly governed by fear.

An obsession with 'security' has been manufactured. The 'axis of evil' awaits; strangers who are not 'with us' must be 'against us'. Americans are surely not terrorists, so they must, by definition, be the terrorized. For many, Armageddon, or the 'end of days', may be visited upon them any moment. Climate change is a new threat: hurricanes can and do destroy cities and lives, with the government complicit. For millions of Americans, the false security of personal firearms is somehow blessed by the Constitution.

In the US, fear is thus the constant and all too familiar companion to life, to liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness.

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This article was published (Sept 24, 2009) in 'Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 17,500 print copies throughout the Gulf Islands and the Canadian Strait of Georgia from Victoria to Campbell River to Howe Sound.

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Those who wish to rule Americans, first make them fearful. Fear—even the simple fear of change—has become the most potent political tool.

This may be why Obama's efforts to ensure health care for all have met with such inexplicable resistance, such blind rage, from his opponents; well beyond that emanating from predictable vested interests. In his pursuit of the 'Audacity of Hope', he is in fact attempting to make a massive and fundamental change in both US culture and politics.

Americans may even be fearful of hope.

### **The View From Canada**

From the Canadian seats in the first row of the balcony, we should not underestimate the significance of this change. In

Canada, there is no equivalent to the oppression of the US health care system. We fear illness and injury, but not the cure or convalescence. Political fear falls on much less fertile ground. We may be stoic; we may be skeptical; we may be apathetic; but we are not afraid.

We should not be bewildered at the phenomenon unfolding across the border, but understanding, sympathetic, and, yes, even forgiving. We are too close not to be affected.

We should reflect upon our good fortune and good health. We have, after all, our own audacity of hope. ✍

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