

Digging In the Right Place

By David Sirota

A Washington State Legislative Proposal by State Senator Karen Keiser

There's a memorable moment in "Raiders of the Lost Ark" when Indiana Jones sees a rival's archaeological excavation and realizes the buried treasure is somewhere else. "They're digging in the wrong place!" he exclaims.

The line could explain why our national elections leave us feeling empty. By expecting so much so fast from Washington D.C., we are digging for "change" in the wrong place.

Think about it: The White House can only be won by raising truckloads of cash from moneyed interests looking to preserve the status quo. Likewise, the U.S. Senate's filibuster rules allow 41 lawmakers, representing just 11 percent of the population, to stop anything. These are institutions designed to prevent change, not embrace it.

Thankfully, the same cannot be said for the so-called "laboratories of democracy" — state legislatures. Amid pundits' breathless analyses of Hillary Clinton's tear ducts, these arenas quietly opened throughout America this month. And from beneath the rubble of celebrity-obsessed campaign journalism and the ruins of national political gridlock, change is being exhumed in two bellwether states.

In a move making health care lobbyists quiver, Washington state Sen. Karen Keiser (D), chairwoman of her legislature's powerful health committee, this week introduced the nation's most far-reaching universal health care proposal. Her legislation is the American West's version of a parallel Wisconsin initiative, and the replication suggests this model may begin building the universal health care system our country wants.

The plan is simple: Employers and employees pay a modest payroll tax in exchange for full medical benefits, with no premiums. Patients never lose coverage and pick the doctors they prefer. And for the spendthrifts, here's the best part: According to an analysis of the Wisconsin proposal by the nonpartisan Lewin Group, the plan would save middle-class families an annual average of \$750 on their existing health care bills. In all, the state would save almost \$14 billion over the next decade.

Seem too good to be true? That's because you're used to being bilked by an insurance industry that drives up premiums, drives down benefits and gives executives like former UnitedHealth CEO William McGuire \$1.6 billion worth of stock options in one year.

Eliminating that greed is precisely how the Washington state and Wisconsin proposals simultaneously save money and cover everyone.

Unlike the much-touted Massachusetts law forcing citizens to buy insurance from the private profiteers, the Washington and Wisconsin models pool all existing health care expenditures and then replace the middlemen with one publicly controlled, not-for-profit system. That structure attacks problems beyond the immorality of allowing 18,000

Americans to die each year because they lack health coverage.

For businesses faced with crushing health care costs, the Lewin Group predicts the plan will save private-insuring employers almost \$700 million a year. For politicians looking to provide economic stimulus in the face of a recession, the nonpartisan Families USA estimates the proposal's investments will create 13,000 new jobs. Even tax reformers have something to like, as Wisconsin's version directs much of the system's savings into property tax relief.

The Royalist Right is distraught about the plan. When an initial draft passed the Wisconsin Senate last year, the Wall Street Journal's editorial board attacked it on the grounds that it "reduces out-of-pocket copayments" and "increases the number of mandated medical services covered" for patients. Wow. Sounds just awful.

The paper then criticized it as a tax increase and labeled it "government-run" — as if patients are better served by paying even bigger premium increases to corporate CEOs whose paychecks grow with each coverage denial.

The screed showed how little conservative elites care, not just for the uninsured, but for the working-class wing of the Republican Party — the roughly 40 percent of GOP voters who, according to the Pew Research Center, tell pollsters they "favor universal health coverage, even if it means higher taxes." These voters are part of a new transpartisan consensus — one that believes the words of the hero we remember this week. "Of all the forms of inequality," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane."

Those desiring "real change" should applaud these Washington and Wisconsin leaders confronting that injustice. Unlike the nearsighted nabobs of national politics and the adversaries of Indiana Jones, these state legislators are digging in the right place.

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