

Making history in California

by Lionel Van Deerlin

There have been nearly a dozen failed efforts to establish compulsory health insurance in California. A new attempt is now under way - one that just might catch on.

And if it does, who would have guessed the reform would be pushed by a rugged refugee from Muscle Beach, out Venice way? Or, for that matter, by a Republican?

By Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, no less. We all know slews of Republicans who will think it out of character - and possibly out of order - for one who flies their party banner to be flirting with (ugh!) socialized medicine. Some may wonder how this came about.

I'm loath to think that California's once dominant GOP has been a victim of trickery. Looking back, though, the manner of Schwarzenegger's becoming governor just over three years ago seems every bit as deceitful - forthrightly deceitful, mind you - as Bob Zuppke's old hidden ball trick at Illinois. The man who was to become our governor was found waiting in the wings after Republicans worked up a full head of impeachment steam against former Democratic Gov. Gray Davis. Detractors had folks believing Gov. Davis was nudging us all toward the poor house.

But one thing they couldn't hang on the guy - Gray Davis didn't play doctor, or even your friendly insurance agent. He never tried signing us to a government health plan.

Some of those who helped finance Schwarzenegger's rise to power may have felt a mite nervous even then, noting his happy marital link to the Kennedy family. Yet few could have foreseen what their man has given them this month - a social platform Mother Jones could proudly endorse.

If Republicans are still perplexed, maybe it's because everything happened so fast. They doubtless remember sitting wide-eyed at Schwarzenegger's movies. Those, after all, were make-believe. But the Terminator has morphed into pro-choice politics, stem cell science and a fuss over global warming. Curses, all of it real.

And now, his proposal for government health insurance. Universal. Compulsory. This the brainchild, 40 years later, of a young immigrant who recalls choosing Richard Nixon over Hubert Humphrey. What gives?

Conservatives should perhaps go easy in assigning political parentage. Yes, Harry Truman was the first president to call for national health legislation. But who were the next in line?

Conservatives Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, that's who. Although no more successful than Truman, both tried.

More Americans should have listened back then. The total cost of U.S. health care was about \$70 billion in 1970. Today it has soared a dozen times higher, moving up at three times the speed of inflation. Statistically, however, America no longer claims to provide the world's best care.

Schwarzenegger has not concerned himself with the manner in which medical care is dispensed. He aims only to spread its financial load. Earlier efforts at universal coverage were aimed at establishing a nationwide system. But if our national government won't budge - well, Massachusetts already has created a state insurance plan.

California, standing alone, is larger than all the Scandinavian nations combined, where the citizenry have enjoyed health protection for decades past. Californians comprise roughly one in seven of more than 40 million uninsured Americans.

It comes down to this: Our No. 1 state is undertaking a job that the federal government should have made a No. 1 responsibility long ago. Powerful forces frustrated earlier efforts. How will this one play out politically?

Democrats, California's majority party in overwhelming numbers, must recognize the ideological gift this governor has handed them, and resist an inclination to dispute his leadership. The party's top functionary, Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, appears to have the legislative skills - and, more important, the modesty - for this unusual role. The rank and file must know that if government health care proves unachievable with a Democratic majority, it never will happen.

Republicans have a chance to scuttle some historic demons and claim a rightful share of credit for the breakthrough Schwarzenegger offers. By ignoring some ancient shibboleths, they can help enact social legislation that's more than 50 years behind the times.

And the governor himself? He has four years to achieve bipartisan agreement on health legislation - a demonstration of working together that would be worth a lot in a nation as fragmented as ours has become. What an incredible legacy for a California governor.

Schwarzenegger can accomplish this useful result while remaining a GOP cheerleader for George Bush, for federal tax cuts, the Iraq "surge" and all.

Only he shouldn't forget to wink.

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