

JELLO JAY ROCKEFELLER ON THE PUBLIC OPTION

A number of people have been expressing pleasant surprise at Jello Jay's recent comments on the public option:

"We can't count on insurance companies. They are just maximizing their profits. They are sticking it to consumers.

"I am all for letting insurance companies compete. But I want them to compete in a system that offers real health-care insurance. I call it a public plan," Rockefeller said...

Government-backed programs are big enough to bring medical costs down, Rockefeller believes.

"Back in 1993, all our Veterans Administration hospitals got together and agreed to buy prescription drugs as a group. The next week, the costs of those drugs went down by 50 percent.

"Today, the insurance industry runs this whole deal, spending \$1.4 million every day to fight health-insurance reform. The government has a lot of power to lower prices," Rockefeller said...

"We have a moral choice. This is a classic case of the good guys versus the bad guys. I know it is not political for me to say that," Rockefeller added.

"But do you want to be non-partisan and get nothing? Or do you want to be partisan and end up with a good health-care plan? That is the choice." [my emphasis]

Now, I am happy to hear Jello Jay talk like a Democrat, demand that we put people's interest ahead of corporations.

And I think the commentary on Jello Jay's aggressive words here often forgets the "politics is local" rule: while every state (save maybe insurance-heavy states like CT) would benefit from the implementation of real health care reform, West Virginia no doubt really could use it.

That said, I am also cognizant of a little historical detail. The most "important" legislative act Jello Jay did last year, for his own career, was to shepherd the FISA Amendment Act through Congress (yeah, "important" is in scare quotes). And the single most important event that brought about Jello Jay's success came when then-candidate Obama flip-flopped on his promises to oppose retroactive immunity, and with that flip-flop signaled to the rest of the caucus it was time to support the bill.

Candidate Obama saved Jello Jay's legislative butt last summer (much to our chagrin).

One of Candidate Obama's earliest Senate backers, of course, was Jello Jay. A guy who loudly supported Obama even when his state voted in large numbers against him in the primary.

Well, here we are with President Obama, revving up the fight for his most important legislative project. Jello Jay is no longer SSCI Chair—he has moved to Commerce, a Committee that will have some say in this process, and one that certainly wields some serious influence. And now we find Jello Jay making sense in a way that many of the most moderates in the Senate are not doing.

I have no proof—but I have a hunch that Jello Jay's welcome statements may stem partly from this close legislative cooperation in the past.

I of course still don't think Obama should have caved on FISA last year. But I will take some bitter satisfaction if doing so ends up getting us an unexpected legislative champion for health care.