

A LACK OF PARTY DISCIPLINE

Several commenters over the last few weeks have opined that Democratic leadership should flex its muscle and exercise party discipline by punishing recalcitrant moderates who break ranks and vote with the Republicans to filibuster (deny cloture) on healthcare bill on the floor of the Senate. You are not alone, more than 79,000 people have signed a Progressive Change Campaign Committee petition urging Democratic Senate leadership to strip the chairmanship of any Democratic who votes to filibuster health care reform.

Personally, I have been saying for quite some time that Nancy Pelosi needed to make good on her promise made when first elected Speaker to clean up the ethics in the House and put teeth in ethics enforcement. A disciplined party should possess the courage and fortitude to investigate and discipline ethically dubious members, even of their own party. Especially of their own party in order to set a standard; it looks fraudulent to go after the other party's violators when you will not do the same with your own.

Alas, neither form of party discipline is in the offing by our Democrats. From The Politico:

Some of the progressives who helped put Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid in power are demanding that they come down hard on House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel and any Senate committee chairmen who stray from the flock on health care reform.

Don't hold your breath.

While three Democratic insiders say leaders have privately discussed the possibility of ousting Rangel or asking him to step aside, there has been no move to approach the New York Democrat —

and aides to Pelosi have made it clear that she won't do anything about him until the House Ethics Committee finishes its probe.

Pelosi's lack of real determination to crack down on ethics should have been evident from her immediate support of Murtha for Majority Leader, not to mention her history of kowtowing to the Democratic Black Caucus on withholding action against William Jefferson (and Rangel).

And as to discipline of the recalcitrant caucus members who would vote with the republicans on a filibuster of healthcare:

The response from Reid's No. 2, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.): "We've never done that. We're not going to do that."

Durbin said the petitioners needed to "count to 60 and understand we need to be together, and there are times when we need to work out our differences."

"This is a silly and unnecessary distraction that is not going to happen – period," added a Senate Democratic leadership aide. "Given how important this is to the rest of his agenda, it is up to President Obama to help the leadership to hold the caucus together."

Not surprisingly, Democratic senators who are still evaluating the reform bill making its way through the Senate Finance Committee aren't worried about the progressives' punishment plan.

"It's not fair to ask people to facilitate the enactment of policies with which we ultimately disagree," said moderate Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.). "So the closer we get to the end of the process, the more, for me, the process and policy will be one and the same."

Several Democratic moderates told POLITICO that they most likely will be

with their party on most procedural votes but could hold out on the last one – to end debate and cut off a filibuster – if they wanted to demand changes to the final product.

“Not vote for cloture? I wouldn’t rule that possibility out – not at all,” said Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), who caucuses with the Democrats. (Emphasis added)

Why are the Republicans able to be so effective even in the minority? Why are the Democrats so feckless and ineffective, even in the majority? Party discipline. This is a concept the Republicans know very well and are proving once again right in the middle of the Democratic flagellation over the healthcare vote. From The Hill:

Sen. Olympia Snowe (Maine) is risking a shot at becoming the top Republican on an influential Senate committee by backing Democratic healthcare legislation, according to senators on the panel.

A Senate Democrat on the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee said Republicans on the panel are threatening to vote against Snowe, who is in line for the senior GOP post that is about to come open.

...

“A vote for healthcare would be something that would weigh on our minds when it came time to vote,” said a Republican on Commerce, who said Snowe would otherwise be assured of the ranking member post if not for the healthcare debate.

Every other GOP member of Finance is expected to vote against the healthcare bill.

Party discipline should not be exercised arbitrarily and capriciously, nor on every issue (as the GOP seems prone to do); but sometimes, on the most important of items, it must be exercised. Without it, there is simply an abdication of leadership and a failure of electoral purpose.