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Dean Of House To Nervous Dems: If We Fail On Health Care, We Lose

Brian Beutler | October 23, 2009, 3:31PM

In a tense, closed door caucus meeting this morning, during which House Democrats were made to go on the record on the question of whether they'd vote for a health care bill with a robust public option, some of the caucus' most nervous members got a bit of perspective from its longest serving members.

"It was really fairly simple speech," said Rep. John Dingell (D-MI). "All I did was to remind the members that the Republicans are out there to beat us by seeing to it that we accomplish nothing during this Congress especially on health care. It's exactly the same tactic, the same strategy they used in 1993. And I reminded them that that tactic took control of the House from us, because, one of the principal reasons was, we were not able to pass a health insurance bill."

Dingell tells me, "I reminded them that Democrats were divided on the issue. And I told them that if they want to come back and control the Congress they should get behind this bill."

I pointed out that there are 47 million Americans--not 35--that would be able to draw benefits under this. That's not only a moral, but an economic necessity. Because we can no longer afford the cost of health insurance... I pointed out that by 2082 or thereabout two curves will cross on a graph. The first the cost of health care the second the United States GDP.

We're going to confront a massive and frightening situation

The more immediate point, though, is that these members have made the wrong political calculation. "I told them that this country will support members that do what they think is right and go home and defend it," Dingell said, reminding them that the real danger is not that some of the bill's provisions, particularly the robust public option, might be unpopular in their districts, but that they go home empty handed.

Dingell's optimistic. "I think we're going to win--I think we very well have to win." And he's putting that onus on the freshman and sophomore members who are still sitting on the fence on a robust public option bill, despite a week of intense lobbying on the part of Democratic leadership. "I also pointed out something--that this leadership is working much harder, and much more effectively on this legislation than last time on health care. It failed by only one vote that time. I pointed out that I don't think any of us would want to be the one vote that pulled this bill down."

We'll know soon if they were listening. Other Democrats were.

One progressive Democrat who supports the "robust" public option was moved by the speech.

That Democrat said Dingell reminded members Congress couldn't get health care done in the 30s, 40s, '65 or '93, and specifically took the blame for the bill's failure during the Clinton administration.

Additional reporting by Christina Bellantoni