

DeMint offers views from earmarks to immigrants

This week, National Journal magazine ranked U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., as the nation's most conservative senator. Post and Courier reporter Robert Behre interviewed DeMint about his hopes for reforming health care, ending most congressional earmark

Saturday, March 03, 2007- The Post and Courier (Charleston)

P&C:

Two weeks ago you joined other Republicans and Democrats to write a letter to President Bush about health care reform, and you have said this is going to be your big issue this year. What opportunity do you sense here?

DEMINT:

Clearly, having well over 40 million uninsured is a problem. The way our health care system is working now, where government pays for part of it but doesn't pay the full price, is shifting the cost over to those with private insurance, which gets more and more expensive every year because the government isn't paying its share. ...

The good news is, if you look at where we are spending money for health care, it's well over \$100 billion in tax deductions to corporations that provide health insurance to their workers. ... The president has announced a bold idea to change our tax code, to spread that well over \$100 billion that we're giving to corporations now to individuals, to families. If we do that, it doesn't cost the taxpayer any money.

P&C:

How would this health care reform work?

DEMINT:

All individuals in the country would get a \$2,250 tax credit. Couples and families would get \$4,500 to buy their own insurance. This would be real money that would go straight to the insurance company, wherever they bought it from. ...

There wouldn't be any reason for any individual not to buy it because if they didn't use that credit, it would just go away. The only thing you can spend it on is health insurance, so people would have an incentive to shop for health insurance and buy the policy that fits their needs, and they would have the money to do it. Some would say you can't buy a policy for \$4,500, but I would say, yes you can, particularly if everyone was buying

insurance, the cost of insurance would go down. And if everybody was paying for health care because they had insurance, the cost of health care would go down.

P&C:

You have said conservatives might need to accept 'a little bit of liberal to avoid a whole lot of liberal.'

DEMINT:

There's no question about it, because there's only one alternative to what we're talking about, and that's a single-payer health care system like Canada or many European countries have, where government basically takes over our whole health care system. The doctors work for the government basically. There's just nothing to indicate that government can do a good job managing a service like that. ...

Once you make it free, then rational decision-making disappears. What we're moving toward is that not just everyone has a policy, but everyone has a policy that's high deductible with a health savings account so that people have the savings to buy their health care but they're buying it, in effect, with their own money that they can keep if they don't spend it.

P&C:

How are you hoping to change Congress' earmarking practices?

DEMINT:

We're off to a good start because the budget we're working under this year has no earmarks. ... I objected to an omnibus bill that was going to have 13,000 earmarks and forced a showdown where we ended up with a budget for the year that had no earmarks. We're trying to put some safety valves in place to make sure that doesn't change. ... As soon as congressmen and senators realize they're not going to be able to get credit for bringing home money, maybe we'll start spending our time doing what we're supposed to do.

P&C:

With South Carolina home to new Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, isn't the state well positioned to benefit from earmarks because of his clout?

DEMINT:

We haven't in the past. ... Even with the senior senators we've had over the years, we certainly haven't ranked that high in per capita money that's come back to the state, but it does give everybody a chance for a press release. So politically it's good, but the efficiency is bad.

P&C:

Can an earmark ever be a good thing?

DEMINT:

Oh yeah. There's justification for a lot of them, but the way earmarks were supposed to be done is the committees here were supposed to discuss the budgets. ... I'll make an example. The transportation bill. I was on the transportation committee last year, and we authorized a new transportation budget. I worked real hard to get specific earmarks for Interstate 73 that would work its way into Myrtle Beach because that's important to the state. ... We're not saying Congress should not be designating money, but I think anyone who looks rationally at 13,000 earmarks, and when you hear the testimony from these agency chiefs, they say it just renders them completely inefficient and unproductive.

P&C:

How optimistic are you that Congress will change its ways in this regard as it tackles the upcoming budget?

DEMINT:

I'm real optimistic because we've almost brought it to the point where they're going to embarrass themselves if they try to do the same thing again. I think America is plugged in, which helps us. The Bridge to Nowhere (in Alaska) became infamous and came to symbolize waste in government. And it's what really, I think, ruined the Republican majority, because everybody just started saying, 'They're just like the other guys.' What I've found traveling around South Carolina is that people are not exactly sure what an earmark is, but they associate it with wasteful spending.

P&C:

Do you think the Senate will pass legislation this year reforming our immigration laws?

DEMINT:

I don't know. ... What happened last year, it just became clear that a lot of people who wanted to pass immigration reform just wanted to create a whole new group of voters. They wanted them to become citizens, that was the priority, when a lot of these people just wanted to be able to work and send their money back home. ...

It seems that there's a growing consensus that we need comprehensive immigration reform that begins with border security, and the second step would be a verifiable worker ID card so employers would know who is here legally.

P&C:

What would you like to see the Senate pass?

DEMINT:

I think we can't ignore the fact that our immigration system is a mess. We've got to have, along with that, a better visa program. We can't get businessmen and tourists into our country. Our tourism is down because we've made it such a hassle to come here. But we need a good temporary worker program, one that could be enforced.

P&C:

If President Bush sought your advice today on Iraq, what would you tell him?

DEMINT:

There's only one thing he needs to know is that this surge has got to work. In three or four months, we've got to know that we can stabilize Baghdad, that the Iraqis will keep their promises to stand up behind us. I just came from a briefing with Condoleezza Rice and (Defense) Secretary (Robert) Gates and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and I think we feel like the Iraqis are positioning their people to keep the promises they've made. ... I think there's some optimism that this strategy will work.

P&C:

How do you expect the debate over Iraq will continue to play out in the Senate?

DEMINT:

I don't know if the Democrats will try to bring back something that's going to embarrass the president or not. That's clearly the objective right now. I think what we'll see for a while is that the Senate will wait to see what House Democrats are going to do as far as cutting funding.