

What About the Gander EJ?

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 6, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

E. J. Dionne has [a smart article](#) [1] in the Washington Post this morning, in which he takes aim at the incoming GOP majority because of their obsession with abstractions. He notes that they speak about "excessive regulation" and "smaller government" but do not really discuss which regulations are not excessive and which are, or which government programs they want to put on the chopping block. EJ calls the new House a "House of Professors" which is a slur against professors, but you get his point.

But, in fairness, I think it would have behooved E.J. to point out that at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, there is a similar professorial attraction to abstractions. The President is a wonk. Whatever his motives, be they pure or malign, it is clear that the man conceives the role of government in highly technical terms. Look at the rationales given for the health care bill: It would help curb rising costs, which were imperilling the financial health of the government and it would improve preventative care, etc. We are still waiting - can you hear me in the White House? - we are still waiting to be introduced to the five year old who has a pre-existing condition and was denied health insurance because of it before the new law passed, but who has it now because the new law demands that this child not be denied coverage. And, dear Communications staff at the White House, the kid better be cute!

What I find especially strange about the way both parties gravitate towards their own variety of abstraction, the GOP to pseudo-first principles and the Dems to data and out-year projections, is that we live in a culture that is dripping in the personal. We love reality shows that are not very real, but introduce us to people, not to ideas: I think it is safe to conclude, having watched, having been forced to watch, one episode of "Jersey Shore," that not a single idea ever made it into the solipsistic plots hatched on the show. Yet, people watched it. We love our sports, but what we really love are sports heroes. We may like the Miami Heat, or we may hate them, but when we say the name "Miami Heat" and close our eyes, we think of LeBron James, Chris Bosh and Dwayne Wade, we do not think of the arena where they play, or of their winning percentage at this point in the season, or any statistical reality.

So, EJ is right that there is something odd about the GOP's fascination with simplistic abstractions, as if reading the Constitution at the start of the new Congress will change the dynamics that govern the allotment of power in a city overrun with lobbyists. I do not believe, as some believe, that big government or small government is the right goal, but intelligent government, suited to do the things it must and none other, adhering to what we RCs call subsidiarity. (Which, despite what some think, is not only a plea for problems to be solved at the lowest level of society possible, but also a command that when the problems remain unsolved, the higher levels of social organization must, repeat must, get involved.) And, I worry that the sloganeering of the GOP and the wonkdom of the White House both conspire to deny the country an intelligent debate about first principles. But, first principles do not win arguments in American culture today, stories do, and stories are about people. And both left and right in Washington these days seem oddly removed from real, breathing people and the lives we lead.

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