

Other Viewpoints

Health care policy falls to partisanship

Kansas Insurance Commissioner Sandy Praeger has asked Gov. Sam Brownback to help her set requirements for health insurance coverage to be sold through insurance exchanges dictated by law.

If the state fails to act, the federal government will do it for Kansas.

Praeger points out the Affordable Health Care Act requires states to set benchmarks for basic health care coverage by the end of September. If they fail to do so, the Department of Health and Human Services will dictate what Kansas will do.

Gov. Brownback once again said he won't do it.

"My administration will not make any decisions regarding the implementation of Obamacare until after the November election," he said Sept. 25. It was a word-for-word repetition of an earlier statement.

Brownback is willing to forgo an opportunity to establish health care insurance guidelines that will work best for Kansas in order to make a partisan point.

It is a perfect example of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

It is true that a Republican victory in November might result in repeal of the health care law, although Mitt Romney has said that he favors retaining part of the reforms and no one can say at this point whether the health insurance exchanges would stay or go under his administration.

The object of the exchanges is to establish an online marketplace where consumers can buy basic health insurance at competitive prices. Insurance companies such as Blue Cross Blue Shield are eager for the state to set up the coverage guidelines so that they can sharpen their pencils and win customers.

To repeat, we're talking free enterprise here. The exchanges would be a medium through which for-profit insurance companies could compete for business. All the state would do is establish coverage guidelines.

In response to this opportunity to help those who don't have coverage through their employer or elsewhere obtain adequate coverage at an affordable price, Gov. Brownback baldly states he is more interested in playing politics. How disappointing.

— *The Iola Register, via the Associated Press*

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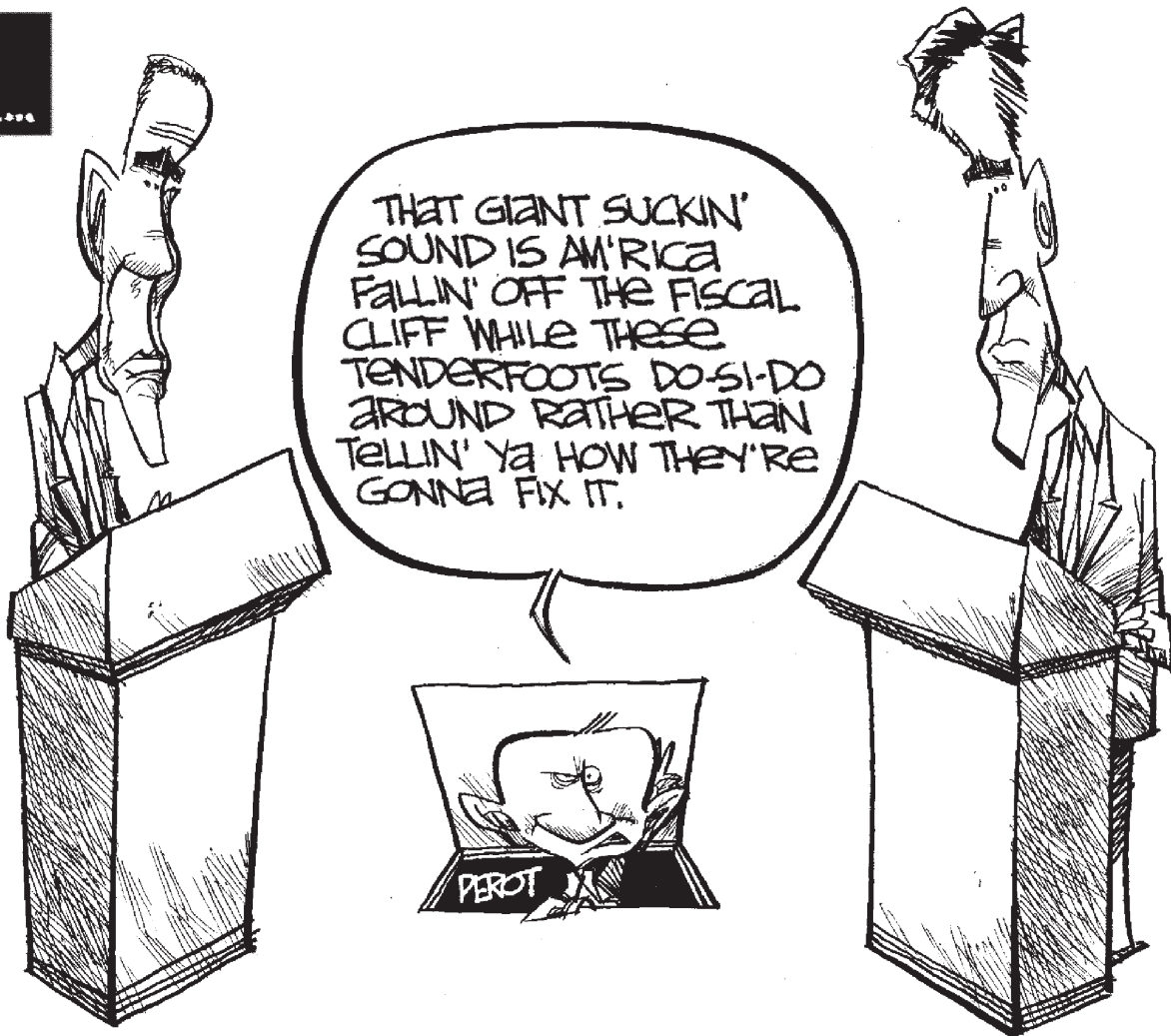
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The OCTOBER SURPRISE...



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Wealth myth: insidious effect on values

The idea that wealth accumulation is an accurate way to measure a person's value in society has poisoned debate and distorted our nation's concept of morality.

While I'm not a fan of the one percent vs. 99 percent rhetoric being championed by intelligent people on the left who should know better — not everyone in the one percent is an evil or greedy person — there is no denying that income gains have overwhelmingly gone to the super-wealthy over the last 30 years.

Now some folks still cling to the age-old myth that this high concentration of wealth at the top is justified based on what these talented people contribute to the economy in terms of innovation and productivity gains. But, when subjected to critical scrutiny, this Ayn Randian worldview has little basis in reality. Too many people have made their fortune by manufacturing toxic financial products instead of starting businesses that create innovative and useful products, not to mention jobs, that actually benefit society as a whole.

Yet, the bootstrap myth stubbornly remains despite all the evidence to the contrary. And this myth has done more than given Wall Street types an inflated sense of their own importance and value to society; it also has cast poor people and working-class people in an extremely negative and unfair light.

If success — allegedly gained by hard work, self-discipline and entrepreneurial spirit — can be measured solely in terms of wealth acquisition



Andy Heintz

• Wildcat Ramblings

tion then following this viewpoint to its logical conclusion means poor people must consist solely of moochers and freeloaders.

If one adopts this misconceived version of rugged individualism, and presidential candidate Mitt Romney apparently has, it's not surprising so many people see the federal deficit as more important than high unemployment. This also is the mindset that underlies the austerity agenda being promoted by many Republicans and, I'm sorry to say, a few Democrats, as a solution to balancing the budget.

The problem with the austere measures being proposed by the Paul Ryan types is not just how detrimental these policies would be to the economy — cutting programs for working- and middle-class Americans will induce a drop in their consumption, which will hurt businesses' bottom lines and keep employers from hiring more people. It's also how these budget-cutting measures never seem to require any sacrifices by those at the top. And, I suspect, the reason these policies are crafted this way is because these politicians, like many of the

super-wealthy they cater to, actually believe wealth is a logical way to measure a person's value to society.

But before dismissing the poor and working class (salary-wise, I certainly fall into one of these groups) as lazy freeloaders, Americans should seriously think about who makes up this group.

Right now there is a social worker in urban Kansas or Alabama living paycheck to paycheck while working with at-risk youth. There is a single mother who works two jobs a day and has to regularly come up with creative, often ingenious, ways to save enough money to pay the month's rent and keep food on the table. There is a single dad whose income is barely enough — he regularly skips meals to save money — to pay for his sick daughter's high medical costs. Is now really the appropriate time to cut these people's benefits and force them to pay federal income taxes? I certainly don't think so.

The federal budget should be balanced in a fair way that requires sacrifice from everyone, but it shouldn't include cuts that deprive people of the means to make a basic living.

Andy Heintz, a K-State journalism graduate and former Colby Free Press sports editor now living in Ottumwa, Iowa, loves K-State athletics and fishing, sports and opinion writing. You can find his blog at www.orble.com/just-one-mans-vision.

Education secretary fails to connect

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan and Kansas National Education Association President Van Roekel addressed student teachers' questions at a forum at Emporia State University. Unfortunately, Duncan addressed five issues and got five issues wrong.

Secretary Duncan spoke forcefully of using multiple measures of teacher effectiveness. Meanwhile, his Department of Education continues to make student test scores the major requirement to receive a waiver from No Child Left Behind. He says one thing; his department's actions require otherwise.

One young student teacher asked about the narrowing of the curriculum and the dismissal of music teachers who did not teach a topic that was required and tested. Duncan asserted that art and music and physical education and the rest of the curriculum were vital to a well-rounded student. He described one music teacher in Georgia who had developed a method to evaluate music teachers.

Duncan's answer was apparently that all courses could be defended by making them all based on student tests and teacher evaluations. He had no idea how much expanded time is being taken to double-block current students for math and language tests. All assessments, all the time.

To standardize-test the whole curriculum would make for 36-hour school days. But of course there is no way to mandate an expansion of curriculum to enforce his well-rounded prescription. Nor did he appear aware that veteran art and music teachers across Kansas and nationwide have already been fired because their courses are not part of the mandated testing. Not a clue.

Another student teacher explained how she and her classmates had to take ever-more-costly content and pedagogy tests to enter teach-



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

ing. Duncan's reply — that these were state requirements and not federal mandates — was jaw-dropping. State teacher-training institutions must require these tests. If more than 20 percent of teacher candidates fail for two years in a row, that teacher school loses its program — according to the federal Higher Education Act. Again, not a clue.

Duncan correctly stressed that the real threat to the future of U.S. education is the shortage of good teachers going into the classroom. But he was blind to the fact that the number of student teachers wanting to enter teaching dropped dramatically because of No Child Left Behind teach-to-the-test oppression.

And despite the recent Kansas waiver of 100-percent-proficient-by-2014, Kansas test scores must still go up. Federally-mandated teach-to-the-test teaching is the cause of the teacher pipeline shortfall. Again, his policies are the problem, not the solution.

Both Duncan and the National Education Association president attributed the current reform movement to the 1983 Commission on Excellence in Education report, "A Nation at Risk." President Ronald Reagan had assigned his Education Secretary, Terrel Bell, to shut down the department. But this report reversed that decision and put education on the national political agenda by proclaiming the situation so bad that it was equivalent to an act of war. This commission did recommend more years

of math and science, longer school days, a longer school year and higher teacher salaries. But it did not mandate a standardized national curriculum nor high-stakes testing. Mandated testing and standardization rests with President Bush's Education Secretary Spellings and President Obama's Secretary Duncan who both ratcheted up the blame and penalties of No Child Left Behind.

If you are keeping count of the clueless scores, we are at strike five. But Duncan is still not "out."

Unfortunately, both political parties play on the same don't-have-a-clue team. Neither presidential candidate will end the tyranny of federalized education where Washington controls 100 percent of education policy while providing only seven percent of school funding.

Nothing short of states pulling out of federal funding will restore teacher professionalism. And in an economy where funds are short, that is a heavy sacrifice for state boards of education to make.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

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Mallard Fillmore

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