

OP ED: Cowardly Donkeys Need to Find The Cowardly Lion's Courage

By Elizabeth Lee Vliet, M.D., © August 10, 2009

I am dismayed that recent Town Halls across the country have been curtailed or cancelled as spineless legislators refuse to face their constituents to hear average American citizens voice their fears and worries about what may be happening to their healthcare under the current “reform” proposals from Washington.

The founding Dean of my medical school and Professor of Medicine used to teach us: “Listen to the patient. If you listen, your patient will tell you what’s wrong. Only then can you develop your plan to help the problem.” Right now, the American public is the “patient” who deserves to be respectfully listened to and have their concerns heard on “the cure” for critical health insurance issues. Polls show that at least 85% of Americans are satisfied with their *healthcare* and do not want the best system in the world destroyed to fix health *insurance* problems we all agree need reform.

A new DNC ad calls citizens at these Town Halls “angry mobs.” Other pejorative labels are even worse. My own congresswoman in Tucson, Gabrielle Giffords, failed to appear at an event for which she had advertised she would be available, abandoning about 300 people waiting to discuss their concerns. Then in a local newspaper interview, she and her staff labeled these citizens, and voters, *manipulative racists*. As a small business owner and taxpayer, who had previously voted for her, I was appalled at being lumped into such despicable labels. Another Arizona representative cancelled her public schedule and walked out of her “Chat With Ann” session in Holbrook Arizona when a citizen shouted, “You don’t appreciate our frustration.”

In spite of this August recess being a critical time for honest debate, Congresswoman Giffords is refusing to hold any healthcare Town Halls during the recess because people are loud and frustrated and yes, angry. In a newspaper interview, she expressed fear for her life. That seems an extreme fear for Town Halls at which the only violence has been perpetrated on an innocent citizen by menacing looking thugs wearing SEIU shirts. Don’t our service men and women, our firefighters, our police, our border patrol agents risk their lives every day to carry out their sworn duties? Certainly our Congressional representatives can buck up and bear a little verbal criticism as part of their sworn duty to their constituents.

Citizens attending town halls and voicing their well-founded fears about government-run healthcare should be listened to attentively, not demonized and dismissed. It is mind-boggling to hear such vociferous criticism of tax-paying citizens. *It would be analogous to doctors saying “I am not going to talk with you about your cancer because you are angry and frightened and upset.”* Members of Congress work for us. In business, when employees fail to listen to their employers, they get fired. Maybe it’s time Congress listens to their “bosses,” or seeks a new job.

I have a simple question for everyone to consider: If our government representatives are too cowardly to face constituents’ concerns and questions now, *how can we expect our government representatives to listen when we have an appeal about our choice of treatment for a life-threatening medical condition?* Demonizing citizens now is an ominous portent for the future if this is how our sole government-run option for healthcare also treats its patients.

The Democratic leadership criticizing citizens at town halls is also mind boggling to me as a citizen who has watched violent anti-war protests displayed on television daily for most of my adult life, even when our troops in harms way were clearly endangered by these constant protests. I had friends from high school dying in Vietnam, while the TV screens were filled with protestors daily, and our returning troops were spat upon. My friends who died in Vietnam never had their face on TV. I have watched the same thing happening with today's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while our soldiers are in harms' way.

Why is it acceptable for anti-war Democrats to organize protests such as these, plus protests led by ACORN and others at the homes of AIG executives and other business leaders, but it is not "OK" for average citizens to speak out and protest current programs proposed in Washington by legislators who don't even read the bills before voting to pass them? People are afraid for what they perceive is a government run amuck, taking control over healthcare and so many other aspects of our daily lives. They also have the right to express their anger—even if in loud voices.

We have legislators who are supposed to be representing us, the taxpayers and voters, yet who are running away from dialogue with us, running away from hearing our concerns, and labeling US the problem. Legislators appear to be giving us a poison pill, while saying it is "Good for us," but then *exempting themselves*. They are "prescribing" what advances their political agenda, what *they think* we need, instead of listening to all of us about what *we know* we want.

From the Wall Street Journal and internet articles, I find that many Democratic legislators across the country have cancelled plans for live Town Halls. They are resorting to "Telephone Town Halls." This one-way, no face-to-face approach defeats the purpose of true debate and discussion. Constituents can only speak if their phone call is accepted. The telephone system is set up to give the politician complete control. Questions are limited and screened to fit the politician's *political* agenda. Just like the avoidance of the Cowardly Lion.

Telephone Town Halls stifle dissent and stifle the very "transparency" this administration promised so often in the campaign. Not to mention, using the Telephone Town Halls completely eliminates the risk of a "tell all" video making it to You Tube so that others can see and hear what *really* went on. How would you like your doctor to *only* agree to talk to you by phone, with limited input from you, and never see you face-to-face?

Instead of an honest debate about what *does* need to be "fixed" with our current health insurance, we get vitriolic diatribes against citizens. Those in power insist it is "My way or the highway." Even our President threatened at a rally in McLean VA that those of us who disagreed with current proposals should *get out of their way*, and let only those in power "clean up the mess."

This "blame the victim" attitude is arrogant and despicable. It demeans those politicians who engage in it. It demeans our entire democratic process. What we are seeing on the national political stage this August would be like doctors blaming patients for *causing* their own cancers. Or, like blaming the rape victim and saying she *caused* the rape because of what she wore.

During my time in Tucson, Congressman Jim Kolbe represented and listened to the views of *all* his constituents, even when some were loud or boisterous in their dissent. There were some particularly “rowdy” Town Halls around the Social Security issues. He didn’t run away from those Town Halls, he faced his opposition, and continued to listen. His replacement is a Congresswoman who is doing exactly the opposite. To me, this is a cowardly retreat from honest debate with her constituents. She held one town hall on healthcare earlier this year, primarily a presentation of the Democratic healthcare plan, before many citizens even had access to the actual content of the proposals.

Now that more citizens have actually *read* the House bills on line, we have people who want a chance to ask their questions and have honest answers. Citizens are not stupid. Those who have taken time to *read the bills*, unlike most legislators, do not accept Democratic leadership’s false “assurances” that are the *opposite* of what is written in bills! That’s a huge part of why citizens are angry. They can read. They have taken time to do their homework. They expect their representatives to do the same. People are frustrated when answers are Party talking points that directly contradict what citizens themselves read in the legislation.

The current healthcare proposals set up a fundamental decision we all face: do we remain free and have the power to control our healthcare decisions or do we let government take over these decisions that affect our very right *to live*? That’s the underlying question about which people are justifiably scared, worried, and angry. They deserve to be heard.

If physicians treated patients as callously and dismissively as our elected representatives are doing, or abandoned them during a time of medical crisis, we would be sued or lose our license. For our elected representatives to turn tail and run and refuse to hear their constituents is just as repugnant. Those who will not meet with their constituents during this summer recess should have their “license” to represent hardworking citizens revoked at the next election.

This dialogue is too important for legislators to turn into Cowardly Donkeys turning tail and running away from open healthcare Town Halls. Our elected representatives need to take a lesson from the Cowardly Lion. They need to find Courage.

They also need to follow the Tin Man’s quest for a Heart. Instead of heartlessly running away, these Tin Men-Women from Washington need to have a *heart* for the hardworking, taxpaying, voting citizens of their districts who are expressing genuine and heartfelt concerns, worries, and fears. They need to have a heart for citizens whose only request is for a chance to be heard.

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For more information on healthcare reform, Dr. Vliet suggests two patient advocate Web sites on healthcare: www.JoinPatientsFirst.com, www.PatientsUnitedNow.com, or the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons at www.aapsonline.org.

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