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FOR YOUR INFORMATION
The Idaho Statesman
Boise, Idaho
Friday April 21, 2017
by **Bill Dentzer**
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Labrador's 'health care not a basic right' is prime takeaway

Always quick-triggered to defend his views, Idaho Rep. Raúl Labrador said a lot of things over his three-hour-plus town hall meeting in Meridian on Wednesday night that his deeply skeptical, often combative audience found objectionable.

And when they did, they were quick to let him know, with a chorus of boos and a sea of red “disagree” signs that have become regular audience favors at such events around the country, typically those hosted by Republican members of Congress.

As with other constituent meet-ups since President Donald Trump took office and Republicans extended their control of government, most of the questions put to Labrador touched on the new president — his policies and actions, his taxes, his repeat trips to Mar-a-Lago, and investigations by Congress and law enforcement into Russian meddling in the November election and possible collusion by Trump campaign associates.

Mostly, Labrador's answers drew disapproval — although he did find favor with the crowd by agreeing that the cost and lack of transparency around the president's frequent trips out of town were an issue for him.

Aside from Trump, the biggest topic of the night was health care, and Labrador's response to one question drew the worst reaction of the evening, one that percolated across the Twitterverse and other social media Wednesday night and Thursday. That came about 23 minutes into the night, when a woman asked Labrador whether he believed that health care should be a basic human right.

His unfiltered, unqualified response: No.

Out came the boos and signs in the auditorium, and online, repudiation and disbelief.

The exchange starts at about the 23:15 mark in the Statesman's Facebook Live video from the event. The questioner cited an April 11 article and editorial from the Journal of the American Medical Association, a study on “Vital Directions for Health and Health Care.”

The study discusses a health system that “performs optimally in promoting, protecting and restoring” the health of people and populations, and helping them reach their potential. The question to be answered, Dr. Daniel Berwick editorialized, is whether the United States intends to achieve that vision. The nation and its leaders “need to ask and answer” whether the U.S. commits to “basic health care as a human right, denied to no one.”

Labrador's questioner asked whether he thought so, and if he did, how he could assure that all Americans “receive the health care they need.”

“If you do not believe that health care is a human right,” she said, “then do you simply believe that only people who can afford to buy health care should get health care.”

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Labrador responded: “No, I do not believe that health care is a basic right.” After the boos subsided, he added: “If something is a right, it’s something that must be provided by the government. But I do believe that people should have access to health care.”

The woman responded that she had “access” to buy a Mercedes. “The only problem is, I can’t afford a Mercedes,” she said. “How can people afford decent health care if it is not provided by the government?”

Labrador, again amid boos and catcalls, responded:

“I think we should we take care of people that cannot work, that cannot provide for themselves. I do think we have a responsibility for those people. But if you’re a working person, if you’re a person that can provide for yourself, I think we should make it easier and less expensive for you to receive health care.”

Pressed further by the woman on how poorer people get health care, Labrador said that group mostly relies on Medicaid. That drew more boos.

The issue is front and center in Idaho, embodied by the so-called gap group of working adults, some 78,000 who do not qualify for Medicaid or for insurance subsidies available on the state health exchange created under the 2010 Affordable Care Act. The Republican-dominated Legislature, after approving the exchange, has balked on ACA’s provision to expand Medicaid for that uninsured group.

Labrador, who opposed the GOP-led overhaul of the ACA that died in Congress last month without a vote, nevertheless said “one of the good things” the proposal did was provide money to “take care of that gap group that you’re talking about.” He cited a figure of \$100 million, but likely meant the \$100 billion figure the bill proposed to make available to states for various contingencies, including care for the sickest people.

“We’re trying to create a system that reduces the cost of health insurance for all Americans, and we do want to help people that are vulnerable with that \$100 (billion) that we were putting into the bill,” he said. “We are trying to help people that don’t have access to health care, but I just don’t think it is a right to have health care.”

That hardly mollified the crowd. As Labrador crossed the stage to take the next question, someone yelled out to him:

“Where do you get your health care?”

“Before I was a member of Congress, I got it for myself and provided it to the five families that worked for me,” he answered.

That exchange became the headline for most of the follow-up coverage of the marathon event on Thursday and drew social media attention all day.

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