Sarah Palin's Canadian Health Care

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Posted: March 8, 2010 08:26 PM

Sarah Palin's recent statement that, presumably during her childhood, she and her family used to cross the border from Alaska to take advantage of Canada's health care system is not really a gaffe or a verbal slipup, but offers an interesting insight into Palin. It is not exactly surprising, or even "ironic," to use Palin's words, that somebody who has made a name, and a great deal of money, for herself by linking health care reform to some kind of socialist bogeyman, used to take advantage of socialized medicine.

Speaking to a Canadian audience and reminiscing about traveling to Canada for health care as a child is the kind of thing we might expect from a progressive supporter of health care seeking to stress the need for a better health care reform system in the US. Had, for example, Anthony Weiner made this comment while on the Canadian side of the border near New York, you can be sure that Fox News, Rush Limbaugh and, yes, Sarah Palin would be seeking to red bait him out of the congress. There will, of course, be no such consequence for Palin.

While it is easy to point out the absurdity of somebody who, as a child, was made aware of the shortcomings of the American health care system spending so much energy fighting against the need to change that system, or to mock Palin for seeming to be unaware of just how telling this statement is, it also suggests a few of her political strengths.

From the time she became a national figure slightly more than 18 months ago, Palin has been, political opinions aside, a confounding mix of political positives and negatives. She is clearly an effective communicator who is able to connect with audiences, albeit within a somewhat limited demographic bandwidth. She has been reasonably successful in turning her most glaring political weakness, her seeming lack of knowledge of public policy, into a strength. She has done this by constantly reasserting her identity as an outsider to explain this away. Like former President Bush, Palin is rarely burdened by any doubt or sense of nuance, so is able to appeal to voters seeking clear, concise and accessible explanations, regardless of if they are wrong.

Palin's ability to turn weaknesses into strengths makes her a potentially formidable politician, but she is weakened by an unwillingness to truly prepare, study or learn. She has been able to hide this by challenging her critics, but one wonders how much more effective she would be if she immersed herself in the study of even a small number of issues.

This latest episode plays very well into Palin's strengths. It is easy to imagine that in the unlikely event that she was challenged for her statement, she would reply that she is not a Washington insider who studies everything her opponents say waiting for a gaffe, but is out there talking to real people. She would avoid the question of how she evolved from a young person who left the country due to the weakness of the American health care system to a middle-aged person who believes that changing that system puts us on the road to Stalinism by asserting her outsider status.
The likely lack of fallout around this issue underscores another of Sarah Palin's surprising political strengths. Although she has been surrounded by bad stories and mini-scandals for about thirty months, including: attacks from former aids to John McCain, reports of spending extraordinary amounts of RNC money on clothes and makeup, an unexpected resignation from her position as Alaska's governor punctuated by an almost surreal resignation speech, various issues regarding her family and her one time son-in-law to be and others, none of it has ever really stuck. Palin is a polarizing figure -- and will likely remain that way as long as she is on the national stage -- but she is also something of an unsinkable one.

A key to Palin's resilience may have been revealed in this latest comment. To Palin it was a throwaway line, good for building a folksy rapport with a Canadian audience. Referring to this as "ironic" is sufficiently cryptic that it is not clear what it even means, but it is clear from her lack of effort to distance herself from this remark that Palin is not really aware of how revealing this admission is. Palin is a complicated political figure, but she may be of less off an ideologue than first thought. Clearly, a true right wing ideologue would probably not have made this revelation. The informality of Palin's revelation, and her seeming lack of understanding of what it meant, suggests that for Palin, the right wing populism, while fun and easy, is not really grounded in anything other than the advancement of Sarah Palin.