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Obama & the Democrats Sending Mixed Messages about the Catfood Commission Left Margin By Carl Bloice BC Editorial Board

Like a lot of people, I often wonder: Do these people meet?

Serendipity does not quite describe what happened the day the Democratic Party convention opened. It looked more like collusion or perhaps just a well-executed campaign maneuver. There was the ubiquitous David Brooks in the *New York Times* openly challenging President Obama to come out forthrightly for "Simpson-Bowles" in his acceptance speech. He was referring to a set of proposals made by the co-chairs of a deficit reduction panel appointed by the President two years ago that called for cuts in Social Security, Medicare, and other safety-net programs and for tax "reforms" that would actually reduce tax rates for the well-to-do and large corporations. That same morning editors of the London-based *Financial Times* called for more "middle-class sacrifice," asserting that "Only by demonstrating his backing for long-term reform can Mr. Obama make the case for fresh steps to help revive the US economy. It is good politics and good economics. Endorsing the Bowles-Simpson recommendations would place Mr. Obama on the high ground for this election - and afterwards."

Meanwhile the ultimate in "Simpson-Bowles" chutzpah appeared on the opinion page of the *Wall Street Journal*, wherein so-called centrist Democrats Patrick Caddell and Douglas Schoen, operatives in the Carter and Clinton Administrations, respectively, called up the President to "change direction - immediately and decisively," and "embrace the findings of the 2010 Simpson-Bowles deficit-reduction commission and make it clear that he too has a plan to revitalize the

U.S. economy, reduce the deficit, reform entitlements and spur economic growth through a fairer and leaner tax system." (The commission itself made no "findings," never came to agreement and adjourned without ever voting on anything.)

Why this coordinated waving of the "Simpson-Bowles" banner on the eve of Obama's acceptance speech?

My hunch is that some people have decided that there is a good chance the President will win reelection and their aim is be able to claim the election, in part, as a mandate for going after Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, "afterwards" under the cover of "compromise." Brooks would seem to be supporting this conjecture when he writes, "A landslide or 'mandate election' in November is unlikely because neither party enjoys a clear advantage. Most fundamentally, any solution to the nation's fiscal crisis is going to require compromise. No matter who is in charge, taxes will have to go up and entitlements will have to be scaled back. The math doesn't work any other way."

I guess it was inevitable that "Simpson-Bowles" would find its way into former President Bill Clinton's nominating speech but it only rated a mention. He praised Obama for offering what he called a "reasonable" and "balanced" plan" for deficit reduction as "the kind" contained in the "approach" of the "bipartisan commission" that he said was "better" than the Republican's plan. That is an understatement. What Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan propose to do to seniors, patients and poor kids is truly horrendous.

Clinton, to his credit, also used the occasion to do something practically nobody in his party's leadership has had the sense - or courage - to do. He laid out what the threat to alter Medicaid actually entails. "They also want to block grant Medicaid and cut it by a third over the coming decade," he said. "Of course, that will hurt poor kids, but that's not all. Almost two-thirds of Medicaid is spent on nursing home care for seniors and on people with disabilities, including kids from middle class families, with special needs like Down syndrome or autism. I don't know how those families are going to deal with it. We can't let it happen."

The *Financial Times* editorial didn't sit too well with some of the paper's U.S. readers. A Colorado doctor, Ron Forthofer, responded that Obama's endorsement of "Simpson-Bowles" "would be using a bipartisan commission as cover to satisfy the demands of the financial

sector and so-called fiscal hawks for deficit reduction without inflicting much pain on the US oligarchy." And Reba Shimansky of New York wrote, "Bowles-Simpson is the document of two very wealthy rightwingers, Erskine Bowles and Alan Simpson, and it expresses their point of view. Bowles-Simpson is a prescription for downsizing government while lowering the marginal tax rate, cutting corporation taxes, Medicare, Medicaid and cost of living adjustments for social security" adding, "It is a not a bipartisan approach to reducing the deficit. Liberals refer to it as the catfood commission because if its proposals were implemented that is all most Americans could afford to purchase."

Brooks is simply wrong. The Ryan plan is not to "cut spending and restructure entitlements," it's to restructure spending and cut entitlements. The restructuring involves more money for the military and lower allocations for education and nutrition aid for those with low incomes; the cuts called for involve Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. Repeating what has become their mantra over the past couple of years, the editors of the *Washington Post* said September 5 that taxes must rise and "entitlements will have to be scaled back."

"We're saddled with monster deficits, and the Republicans refuse to let this president do the brave thing Bill Clinton did, and get us more revenue," *New York Times* columnist Gail Collins wrote last week. True. And that's where "Simpson-Bowles" comes in. The money has to come from somewhere but rather than raise taxes on those who have been making out like bandits the past couple of decades the aim is to take it from sick people, seniors and poor kids and make life even more precarious for the million of working people who have lost so much and are still losing out amid the ongoing economic crisis.

The final moments of the convention revealed to what extent the full court press to make endorsement of "Simpson-Bowles" an objective of the Obama-Biden campaign succeeded. In his acceptance speech the Vice-President mentioned it in passing. In his address Obama avoided the term but said, "Now, I'm still eager to reach an agreement based on the principles of my bipartisan debt commission. No party has a monopoly on wisdom. No democracy works without compromise. I want to get this done, and we can get it done."

That's mealy-mouthed. If he means the principle that revenue increases should be accompanied by spending cuts that's one thing. If he means he is open to taking a meat axe to Medicare, Social Security in return for making the very rich pay taxes at rates they once did,

that's another ball of wax. In his speech he pledged not to do the latter but his bow to "Simpson-Bowles" is not at all reassuring.

Digby at the Campaign for America's Future wrote after the President's speech, "There's a lot of wriggle room in there, and quite a few straw men, but if you read it literally, he specifically promised not to slash those programs in exchange for tax cuts. What he didn't do was promise not to cut those programs in exchange for tax hikes --- which is what the Democrats are seeking. He won't agree to tax cuts for millionaires. That's a good thing. But will he agree to cuts if the Republicans agree to raise some taxes? We don't know."

"Mitt Romney must not become president," Adam Green, head of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, tweeted right after Obama concluded his speech. "But it's unacceptable for a Democratic president to pull the wool over supporters' eyes by talking blandly about a 'bipartisan commission' that actually proposed extreme cuts to Social Security and Medicare benefits -- and lowering corporate tax rates."

Simpson-Bowles "offers draconian austerity for the many and even more tax breaks for the wealthy few," says Richard (RJ) Eskow of the Campaign for America's Future. "No wonder Simpson and Bowles keep praising Paul Ryan to the skies: Simpson/Bowles and Romney/Ryan differ only in emphasis."

"While voucherizing Medicare will presumably save the government money (at least up front) and balance its books, it'll do so on the backs of most American seniors," writes American Prospect co-editor Harold Meyerson. "Obama's value of citizenship won't permit that, and it's on this battlefield that the Democrats will fight this fall." One hopes. But a lot of us would feel a lot better if the Administration stopped sending out mixed messages.

David Brooks didn't like Obama's speech at all and that's good news. "The Obama speech offered some important if familiar hints of big policy ideas," he wrote. "There was a vague hint of a major tax reform. There was a vague promise to accept an agreement based on the principle of the Simpson-Bowles committee on deficit reduction. But it's hard to be enthusiastic about President Obama truly championing initiatives that get no more than a sentence or a clause."

Likewise, the editors at *Washington Post* - prone as they are to counsel austerity for working people - were disappointed as well. "He vowed, 'I

will never turn Medicare into a voucher,' but he gave his audience no indication that his solution - controlling health care costs - might involve sacrifice on the part of seniors, they wrote the morning after the President's speech. "He promised 'responsible steps to strengthen' Social Security, which he has neglected throughout his first term. As to which steps those might be, not a word."

Hardly a speaker at either the Republican or Democratic conventions could step away from the microphone without referring at least once to the "American dream" (which used to mean owning your own single family house) and ascribing so many different and conflicting attributes to it as to render the term meaningless. On the eve of the confab in Charlotte, the *Financial Times'* chief foreign affairs commentator, Gideon Rachman, warned Obama to "be careful not to tread on the American dream," and went on to inform us that "The idea of the 'land of opportunity', where an individual is free to make his own way, remains inspiring - far more inspiring to most Americans than the notion of a social safety net." He could be right but I'm certain he didn't poll people in my neighborhood.

The Democratic Party platform says the Romney-Paul Republican budget plan to give seniors coupons for health care "would end Medicare as we know it." And, it pledges a new Obama Administration "will not ask seniors to pay thousands of dollars more every year while they watch the value of their Medicare benefits evaporate. "It further pledges to "find a solution to protect Social Security for future generations" and to "block Republican efforts to subject Americans' guaranteed retirement income to the whims of the stock market through privatization." The President said, "No American should ever have to spend their golden years at the mercy of insurance companies. They should retire with the care and the dignity they have earned. Yes, we will reform and strengthen Medicare for the long haul, but we'll do it by reducing the cost of health care, not by asking seniors to pay thousands of dollars more. And we will keep the promise of Social Security by taking the responsible steps to strengthen it, not by turning it over to Wall Street."

The argument will be made that the words of a party's platform and the declarations of its candidate don't mean much in the real world of political wheeling and dealing. Often that's true and it's why one of the most important challenges facing progressives, seniors and labor in this election period is acting to secure a guarantee that such promises are kept, that digging our way out of capitalism's latest crisis (far from over) is not premised on preserving present class inequities while

undermining the security and economic well-being of working people on the job or in retirement.

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