

CECI CONNOLLY'S PAY2PLAY PUFF PIECE

The WaPo just doesn't get it, I guess. Just days after it was revealed that Ceci Connolly was the "Play" in the WaPo's Pay2Play dinners, she's out with an article based in significant part on quotes from those invited to the Pay2Play dinner.

There's Nancy-Ann DeParle, who was invited to the dinner.

Early on, Obama and health czar Nancy-Ann DeParle discussed the parallels with Johnson and creation of the health program that serves 45 million seniors and people with disabilities today. Just as Johnson gave legendary lawmaker Wilbur Mills (D-Ark.) latitude to craft the Medicare bill, Obama has asked Congress to write the health-care revamp legislation.

[snip]

In private meetings or phone calls with legislators, Obama "has an easy familiarity," said DeParle, who often joins the sessions. "He has a way of getting right to the heart of the matter. He's pushing and prodding and giving no ground."

When the president leans back in his chair, flashing a broad smile, "he is very persuasive," she said. After he listens to lawmakers' concerns, he often replies: "There's no reason to delay."

As a reminder of the blueprint they have settled on, DeParle keeps a Johnson quotation under glass on her desk, just above the keyboard. It reads: "There is but one way for a president to deal with the Congress, and that is continuously, incessantly, and without interruption."

There's Olympia Snowe, who was invited to the dinner.

Obama has lavished attention on moderate GOP senators such as Olympia J. Snowe (Maine) and Charles E. Grassley (Iowa), who provide the seal of bipartisanship he covets. His message to Snowe, like many others, is that "this is his highest domestic priority, and he wants to get it accomplished and done this year," she said. "I indicated to him it was important to be flexible on the time frame and on trying to draft the substance of legislative policy."

Snowe and Rockefeller praised Obama for his deference to the legislative branch, but both signaled he may soon have to wade into the messier details of the bill.

"At some point, the president's going to have to play a pivotal role in shaping what happens," Snowe said. "It is crucial."

And who knows whether Jim Cooper—who had already accepted the invitation to the dinner—is who Ceci bases this assertion on.

On Capitol Hill, conservative House Democrats are pushing back against a graduated surtax on incomes exceeding \$350,000 a year, saying the plan would unduly increase the highest marginal tax rate. Many senators expressed a distaste for any tax increase for the wealthy.

It sort of makes you wonder whether Max Baucus, Jello Jay, and Diane DeGette—the other Dems cited in the article—feel gypped that they didn't get their invite to Katharine Weymouth's house.

And of course, Ceci's going to include the Third Way; any bets that Jim Kessler had Weymouth's

soiree penciled into his calendar?

"Behind closed doors, he essentially says: If this sinks, we will have trouble in 2010," said Jim Kessler, vice president for policy at the moderate Third Way think tank. "If this goes down, they will lose a whole lot of momentum on everything else. Clinton's whole agenda went down" after the reform's defeat.

Mind you, I want Obama to succeed with health care reform. But this kind of puff piece probably doesn't help—it certainly takes the news value of the article and tarnishes its value.

And just as importantly, by relying on several of the people invited to the Pay2Play dinner, this puff piece shows, once again, that the dinner was about selling Ceci Connolly and her little network of conservative Hill friends. A pity for Kaiser Permanente (the planned sponsor); they too could have been part of this beautiful pageant.