

We Are All Actors
Act 2, Scene 1
"The Congressman Reads his Email"

by
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INT - A CONGRESSMAN'S OFFICE

A CONGRESSMAN sits behind a desk in his office, reading a briefing sheet. On the desk is a nameplate reading "Mr. Smith". There is a knock at the door.

CONGRESSMAN

Come in.

A young man, AIDE #1, opens the door and approaches the Congressman's desk

AIDE #1

I think we may have a problem with the healthcare bill. We've gotten hundreds of emails over the weekend, and we're starting to get phone calls.

CONGRESSMAN

What's the problem?

AIDE #1

Apparently the problem is with paragraph 7 - it's very controversial?

CONGRESSMAN

Who's complaining and what's the problem?

AIDE #1

Do you want to see the correspondence?

CONGRESSMAN

Do I have to?

AIDE #1

I think so; sorry?

CONGRESSMAN

OK, let's take a look at the addresses and the numbers.

Aide #1 uses the push-to-talk feature on his cell phone

AIDE #1

Could we get the healthcare emails in here?

The door opens. An older man (AIDE #2) and a young woman (AIDE #3) enter, holding several canvas bags.

CONGRESSMAN
I see you printed them out.

AIDE #2
Yep. Stationery bill's gonna be a
killer this month.

CONGRESSMAN
Have you sorted them?

AIDE #3
Yes.

CONGRESSMAN
How many for and how many against?

AIDE #3
It's running about 3-to-1 against.

CONGRESSMAN
Then let's look at against first.

AIDE #2
OK....

Aide #2 dumps a big bag of letters on the congressman's head. The congressman picks a letter from the pile and reads it. He picks up another one and reads it. He picks up a third letter and reads it.

CONGRESSMAN
These are all the same. Do you
think they're computer-generated?

AIDE #3
A lot of them probably are.

CONGRESSMAN
Can we figure out how many of them
are from real people?

AIDE #2
Maybe, but it would be a lot of
work.

CONGRESSMAN
OK, get started on that. In the
meantime, do we know how the
interest groups are lining up?

AIDE #1
AMA is in favor and PHARMA is
against, but AARP isn't sure yet.

CONGRESSMAN
Hmmm. What about other groups?

AIDE #1
You want to see the mail?

The congressman reaches into a drawer and puts on a hat.

CONGRESSMAN
Why not?

AIDE #1
Here are the ones in favor.

Aide #2 dumps a bag of blue letters on the congressman's head.

AIDE #1
And here are the ones against.

Aide #3 dumps a bag of red letters on him.

The congressman picks up a letter and reads.

CONGRESSMAN
Who are the "Antarctica Liberation Front", and what do they stand for?

AIDE #3
We're not really sure, but they seem to be very concerned about penguins. I don't think they're a major influencer on this issue.

CONGRESSMAN
How many groups have written in, all told?

AIDE #2
About a hundred.

CONGRESSMAN
And how many of them actually know something about the issue?

AIDE #1
Well, we know about 15 of them are subject-matter experts. A few are clearly fringe groups. The rest - it's hard to tell.

CONGRESSMAN
Do the experts agree?

AIDE #1

Not really, and several pressure groups are pushing incompatible amendments.

CONGRESSMAN

Do we know what their agendas are?

AIDE #2

Not in all cases. Some are clearly funded by interested parties, but we don't know all their funding sources.

The congressman picks up a few more letters and reads through them quietly.

CONGRESSMAN

Don't we have a way to figure out what real people really think?

AIDE #3

We have a lot of pieces of the puzzle. We have databases that tell us who's on the boards of the interest groups. We have other databases that tell us which individuals and corporations fund these groups, and how they've lined up on issues in the past. We can also get information on how much authority most of these groups have. What we don't have is a good way to put all the pieces of the puzzle together so we can get a clear view of who's lined up for and against, and how many citizens and experts are behind them.

CONGRESSMAN

Do we have to figure all of that out ourselves? Why can't these groups work together to agree on a smaller set of options?

AIDE #3

They don't have the tools they need to do that. Most of these groups are nonprofits.

(MORE)

AIDE #3 (cont'd)

It's not easy for them to figure out who else is working on each new issue, and it's also hard for them to get credit for their work when they work together - they need to get credit so they can demonstrate success to their funding sources.

The congressman picks up two large handfuls of letters and holds them up.

CONGRESSMAN

Well, there's got to be a better way to do it than this.