

The Health Care Debate That Might Have Been

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A few weeks ago, our provincial and federal leaders made headlines by suggesting a public debate on health care. Mike Harris began by challenging Jean Chretien. Our PM turned down the invitation, but federal Health Minister Allan Rock said he would debate Harris any time, any place.

So far, there is no sign that the public debate will happen. As it turns out, however, Mike Harris and Allan Rock met in private for a practice debate. To know what happened, read on.

Mike: Thanks so much, Allan, for getting together. I know it is a hassle coming down to this hidden cave in Haliburton.

Allan: It's worth the trouble though, keeping our friendship a secret. It's more useful to do all our public feuding. Avoids anyone from paying too much attention to the issues. We should get down to business, though. Why don't you start?

Mike: Sure thing. The problem, you know, are these out of control health care costs. In Ontario, we've increased spending from 17.7 billion in 1997 to 24.9 billion this year. We can't keep this up without more federal money.

Alan: Mike, you know how misleading those figures are. To start with, they don't take in to account inflation, the increase in population, or the ageing of the population.

More important, they ignore what happened between 1992 and 1997. During those years, governments reduced expenditures on health care. So all these recent increases are just playing catch-up for the years when we cut spending. In Canada, we're just now passing the levels of real spending per person that we had back in 1992.

Most important of all, because of the growth of the economy, we've got more to work with. In 1992, we were spending 10.0% of our gross

domestic product on health care. Now we're only spending 9.3%. The bottom line is that when it comes to health spending, we've still got a lot of room to manoeuver.

Mike: Wait a minute. You're ignoring health care spending in relation to other government services. Health care is now taking up more 38% of our provincial budget. If these trends continue, we'll have nothing left for education, or anything else.

Allan: Mike, you little devil. You know the growing percentage on health is because of all your cuts in education, welfare, social services, and the environment. Your common sense revolution has cut provincial spending from 18% of the Ontario economy to 14%. Health care spending looks bigger because everything else is smaller.

Mike: There is still no getting around it. With all the expanding medical technology, drug costs that really are exploding, and the fuss people are making about home care, we don't have the money.

Allan: You would, if you weren't so bloody minded about tax cuts. The tax cuts you've made since 1995 are now costing you over 10 billion per year in lost income. And now, you have gone ahead with more than 2 billion in cuts to corporate taxes, and a 300 million tax break for parents who send their kids to private schools. If you hung on to that money, you'd have plenty to cover your health care costs.

Mike: OK, just between us, I'll come clean. Everything you say is true. But your holier-than-thou attitude is no better than my distortions! Federal spending on health is also just back to where it was in 1992. Shortly before the 2000 election, your government instituted the biggest tax cut in Canadian history, and promised a total of \$100 billion in tax cuts over five years. If you hung on to that money, you'd have no trouble supporting the provinces the way you should.

Allan: Well, uuuhhhhhh....

Mike: And furthermore, you guys are supposed to be liberals! You claim to believe in the Canada Health Act, but you have done precious little to enforce it. You are still allowing people to pay extra to jump the queue for fancy diagnostic tests like MRI. You are allowing private pay for abortions

in New Brunswick.

On top of that, you are supposed to understand that when you talk about the health of the population, health care is not the most important factor. Poverty, poor housing, inadequate nutrition, and polluted air and water are bigger threats to health than limits on health care spending. Allan: How can you talk like that! It's your government that has closed down public housing, cut welfare, and been responsible for the epidemic of homelessness.

Mike: Of course, but that's what we are supposed to do. We are Tories, and right wing Tories at that. You high-minded liberals should know better. Take housing for the poor. Canada is the only industrialized country without a national housing program. You are the ones who shut that down, and only now are you making plans to start it up again. And your dollar commitment to the program is totally inadequate.

Allan: Mike, you know, I'm thinking this debate might not be such a good idea. It is liable to make it obvious that both your government and mine care more about tax cuts that benefit higher income Canadians and corporations than we do about maintaining public health care.

Mike: You've got a point. Let's just keep blaming each other for health care problems from a distance. Still, it's been great to see you.