

## **Saving Medicare Demands Tough Resolve**

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**(Winnipeg Free Press Headline: Attack provinces to save medicare)**

Paul Martin is hoping to win the upcoming election by girding himself in Medicare-defenders' armor.

But for Martin's Medicare defense to go beyond election posturing, his Liberal government must resolve a fundamental contradiction. Any serious Medicare revitalization will run afoul of the provinces.

The problem any post-election federal government will face is that several provinces have no interest in preserving the central principle of equitable access to health services. Quebec, British Columbia and New Brunswick have proved increasingly willing to let their citizens pay to jump the health care queue.

These governments allowed the expansion of facilities offering quick access to sophisticated diagnostic tests, particularly MRI scanning, for a fee. Those who jump the queue get quicker access to additional procedures, including surgery, that depend on MRI diagnosis.

This practice violates the Canada Health Act. But both provincial and federal governments seem to believe that if everyone keeps quiet about it, no one will notice. And so far, not many people have.

But that may be changing. Alberta is the number one Canada Health Act violator, and its leaders are increasingly open about their desire to make sick patients pay.

Health Minister Pettigrew has acknowledged that Ottawa has been inconsistent and arbitrary in enforcing the Canada Health Act. Indeed, they've been so lax that the federal auditor has labeled their negligence, and Medicare advocates are trying to force more stringent enforcement through the courts.

Since he has confessed his government's incoherence in Canada Health

Act policy, what is Pettigrew's solution? Involve the provinces. "Leaving the enforcement exclusively in the hands of the federal cabinet does not really guarantee us the best possible enforcement."

But isn't Pettigrew aware that sharing policy about health act enforcement with Alberta Premier Klein and his Health Minister Gary Mar will be handing the keys to the henhouse to the fox?

Maybe that's his intent. For instance, Pettigrew has said that he's ready to discuss whether MRI is a necessary health service. That's a way out – just define a service as unnecessary, and you don't have to worry about queue jumping.

Other statements, however, suggest a different approach. "I think we should be developing, along with the provinces, certain mechanisms in which we would make sure that the Canada Health Act is implemented." Perhaps, rather than handing out the keys, Pettigrew wants to negotiate henhouse access with the fox.

Canada Health Act enforcement isn't the only area where the federal health care ship may founder on the rocks of provincial intransigence. Martin says he's ready to give more money to the provinces, but only if they agree to be accountable. Specifically, he wants to ensure adoption of Romanow report recommendations for national home care, prescription drug, and primary care delivery programs.

What's Gary Mar's reaction to that? He's not interested in a "rehash" of the Romanow recommendations.

And he's got a point. A commitment to move toward national home care and pharmacare was part of the 2003 federal-provincial accord. So far, nothing has happened. The provinces have not taken their pledges seriously. The agreement had no enforcement mechanisms, and they know it.

The way the Liberals have handled the Canada Health Council demonstrates the consequences of their contradictions. A key recommendation of the Romanow report, the Council is intended to monitor the performance of the system, and ensure both federal and provincial governments fulfil their responsibilities. But the provinces,

particularly Alberta, tried to kill the Council.

What was the compromise? The Liberals established the Council, but have given it a puny budget, so small that it will be impossible for the Council to fulfil its mandate. Even the Council's hand-picked Chair, Michael Decter, is sufficiently irritated to make his frustration public.

"This thing is a little off the rails," said Decter recently. "The Council itself was to have been created in 90 days and took nine months, that's not a promising start if you're going to convince Canadians you're going to shorten wait times."

So, if Martin is serious about revitalizing Medicare, what should he do? History provides the solution. Back in the days when Liberal governments were ready to take action that was best for Canadians, they had to take some heat from angry provinces. When Lester Pearson first implemented Medicare, Ontario Premier John Robarts had this to say.

"Medicare is a Machiavellian scheme that is one of the greatest political frauds that has been perpetrated on the people of this country."

Unless Martin – or indeed, Jack Layton or Stephen Harper – are ready to get tough with the provinces, they can never secure Medicare against those who want to destroy it. Layton has made it clear that he will put Medicare above provincial autonomy, while Harper wants to hand the provinces more power. Exactly where Martin stands remains, for now, mysterious.