



# The Politics of Canadian Health Care in a New Conservative Era

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# Canada's Health System in Three Bullets (and one sub-bullet)

- Health insurance & organization/delivery of services is (primarily) provincial jurisdiction
- Federal gov't provides \$\$ for “medically necessary physician & hospital services” under *Canada Health Act*
  - Portable, Universal, Accessible, Comprehensive and Publicly Administered
- Other services (LTC, drugs, home care, etc.) provided either under provincial programs (often with user fees or co-pays) or through private insurance



# Changing Policy Landscape

- Quebec's response to Supreme Court decision re: private insurance for publicly insured services (*Chaoulli v. the Queen*)
- Growing presence of private surgical facilities in some provinces & emerging debate of how they relate to publicly financed & delivered services...
- Increasingly acute Health Human Resource problem vis a vis shortages and distribution of docs, nurses and others...



# The Public's Issues

- Access to services
  - Wait Times for key surgical & diagnostic services
  - Narrow conception of accessibility
- Sustainability of system
  - Multiple definitions of what this means
  - Key concern is % of provincial budgets to health
  - Crowding out of other policy priorities
  - Concern over fall-out from Court decision
- Slow pace of reform in the provinces
  - Trust eroding that governments will deliver



# Provincial Health Reform Agendas

- Health Human Resources planning improving
  - Provincial Plans developed & F/P/T coordinated plan emerging
- Primary Health Care initiatives beginning to take hold at the regional health authority level
- Wait time reduction strategies being implemented & showing signs of improvement
- Greater attention to “public health”, “prevention” and linkages with determinants of health



# The Unbearable Invisibility of Health Reform...

- There is real reform happening down on the ground but it is fragmented and local
- It remains invisible to public, media & politicians obsessed with “crisis” stories and the search for the “big bang” solution
- The real challenge is getting attention focused on what is working – and transferring success across jurisdictions
- General public & “the political class” are increasingly impatient with slow pace of reform...



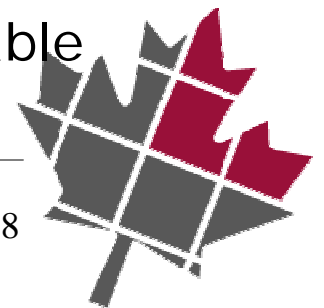
# The 2006 Election: Background

- Liberal Party (centre/centre-left) governed from 1993 to 2006, in minority from 2004
- New “united right” ran effective campaign and Conservative minority elected in January 2006
- Conservatives declared support for “universal, single payer health care system” despite previous wavering
- Removed “privatization” from election debate
- Both parties focused on “**CARE GURANTEES**”
- Health care not key election issue...



# The Conservatives in Power

- Government to focus on “**5 Priorities**” for next Parliament:
  - **Accountability** – transparency on spending, limits on lobbyists, etc.
  - **Lower Taxes**
  - **Crime** – e.g. mandatory minimum sentences
  - **Child Care** – direct payments to parents
  - **Care Guarantees** – formal recourse for citizens experiencing long waits for certain health services (may include private delivery or travel to available service elsewhere)





# The Conservatives in Power

- To date PM Harper has run very tightly controlled government
  - Limited media access to politicians
  - Centralized decision-making in PMO
  - New budget contained multiple tax reductions, one tax increase & new "*Accountability Act*" tabled
- Has built strong relationship with Quebec Premier & annoyed Ontario Premier
- Focus is solely on "Five Priorities"



# Meanwhile...in the provinces

- Quebec responds to Supreme Court:
  - Limited access to private insurance
  - Care guarantees for some services
  - No “dual practice” physicians
- Alberta’s Third Way:
  - Had proposed increased access to private insurance to buy faster service and regulated dual practice (“after hours”)
  - Government backs away at the last minute due to public and federal government opposition



# Federal Priorities: Care Guarantees

- Gov't reiterates commitment to “**care guarantees**” for key services
  - advanced diagnostics, sight restoration, orthopaedics (knees and hips), cardiac (CABGs) & cancer
- But no details on what the “guarantee” means
  - How to define it (by procedure or by patient)?
  - How to measure it (benchmarking)?
  - How to enforce it (how to get provinces on board)?
  - What happens if guarantee is not met?



# Rocks and Hard Places, Part I

- The federal government is facing a policy dilemma:
  - Committed to less intrusion into prov. jurisdiction
  - But “care guarantees” necessitate intense intergov’t negotiation to achieve consensus
  - Requires strong policy leadership from federal gov’t
  - Provinces concerned about cost of implementing care guarantees & who designs them...
  - Does not want to tie care guarantees to large new transfers to provinces...



# Rocks and Hard Places, Part II

- There is also a political dilemma:
  - Need to deliver something on care guarantees before next election (action promised on all 5 priorities)
  - Public anxiety over wait times is not abating (although system is improving)
  - Resistance from provinces that agreed only to benchmarking but not to guarantees
  - Gov't has (so far) appeared strong and decisive on issues...but getting little traction here
  - Private Insurance industry gearing up for change



# Elephants in the corner...

- Despite Alberta's change of heart, there is growing pressure to confront the emerging private delivery/private payment debate
  - The consensus over single-payer, universal, single-tier access system is fragile (the right is emboldened & building counter-consensus)
  - If wait times do not improve & are not seen to improve this pressure will grow...
- Health human resource crisis needs attention



# Prospects for change...

- Government operating in a difficult environment:
  - *Intergovernmentally*: “fiscal imbalance” and “respect for jurisdiction”
  - *Politically*: governing to get a majority next time & inroads into Quebec may be key
- Issues beyond the 5 Priorities crowding onto the agenda:
  - Canadian troops in Afghanistan
  - Productivity issues (esp. with high dollar)
  - Canada-U.S. relationship needs managing



# Concluding Observations

- Care guarantees could prove more complicated than was assumed:
  - No provincial consensus, no federal willingness to “buy” cooperation
  - Government still vague on what the “guarantee” will guarantee...and how it will be guaranteed
  - Will it involve private, for-profit delivery?
- Can't afford to blame provinces for failure
- Needs to have something in place in 18 months for next election...or sooner (!)







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