

RNAO's priorities with new government



In the aftermath of the Gomery inquiry, voters sent a clear message that corruption will not be tolerated and gave the Conservative party, and its platform, a minority govern-

ment. While the election results clearly point to voters' disdain for scandals, do they signal a fundamental shift in values? Are the social reforms that people in this country fought so valiantly for no longer important to them?

RNAO hopes that's not the case. We also hope voters, in their anger towards the Liberals, have not given power to a party that will compromise social progress.

In December, just before the federal election, RNAO issued to all party leaders nine questions on health and social issues. Indicating their full support for a publicly funded and universally accessible health-care system, the Conservative party also stated that provinces should have "maximum flexibility" to deliver health services. As a veteran in the fight to protect Medicare, RNAO knows code words such as "maximum flexibility" mean "privatization" and "for-profit delivery" – just as words like "choice" meant the same thing a couple of years ago.

During the campaign, Stephen Harper outlined alarming directions on central social issues, including health care. The Conservative platform outlined how it would open the door to further privatization. Such a policy direction from our federal government is particularly damaging in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's Chaoulli decision that struck down Quebec's ban on private health insurance. When combined with Harper's *Patient Wait Times Guarantee*, which promises treatment elsewhere if the wait is too long in a patient's home province, this will likely lead to the rampant proliferation of for-

profit health services unlike any we have seen before.

What is most concerning is that even without the approval of the federal government, and before the Chaoulli court ruling, British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec had already opened the door to for-profit clinics. Now that the federal government intends to approve and perhaps even encourage more for-profit delivery, our concerns intensify.

RNAO is watching carefully to see how federal policies may spill over in Ontario. Already this past January, a Vancouver businessman announced plans to set up clinics

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in Ontario, charging patients up to \$3,500 for health services.

Nurses are alarmed by these policy directions. Sold to Canadians as measures to enable timely access to health-care, these policies and the implications of mixing for-profit motives with wait-time guarantees, were hardly discussed on the campaign trail. Paying expensive fees to send patients to for-profit clinics, to other provinces, or to the United States, especially on the heels of announcements of major tax cuts, will further deplete the resources available to bolster real solutions to strengthen Medicare, including improving wait times. This money would be better spent hiring badly needed nurses, doctors and other professionals.

The proliferation of for-profit facilities will also lead to the hemorrhaging of our scarce supply of health professionals from the public sector to the private one, as evidenced in jurisdictions with parallel systems.

The Conservative party also indicated it had no policy for replacing the thousands of nurses in Canada retiring by 2010. While acknowledging the need to work with the provinces to train more health professionals, few specifics have been provided. All nurses must press our new Prime Minister for details on this issue to ensure Canadians have timely access to health professionals, whether they are waiting for a new hip or to see a primary care practitioner.

RNs know that health and health care do not exist in a vacuum – they depend on the broad determinants of health. In this context, several policies of the new government raise red flags: tax cuts that deplete essential resources needed to maintain and enhance social programs; proposed changes to our national childcare program; withdrawal of support for the Kyoto Protocol in a context of deteriorating environmental health; and discussions about a role for Canada in the American missile defense program. These policies are incompatible with nurses' concept of health, and our aspirations for a kinder and gentler society that cares about the health and well-being of all its people.

Canadians will watch the direction our new Conservative government takes on these important issues. RNAO is ready to work constructively and proactively with the new government, and to do our very best to influence positive outcomes.

We will raise our concerns, propose sound and healthy policies, and applaud when the government makes the right choices. The fact that it is a minority government gives us hope that we can make a difference. If our efforts fail, we won't be discouraged. We will continue to speak out for health and stand up for Medicare. After all, Canadians consistently rank this as their top priority.

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