

Nurses keep politicians' feet to the fire



At the time of writing this column (Sept. 30), the federal election campaign is on and RNAO is in the midst of it – speaking out for health, speaking out for nursing. As you read

this issue of the *Journal*, you already know how the final two weeks of the campaign evolved, and the results of the election. Without the luxury of that information, I must focus on the campaign as it has been so far, and on what RNAO and Ontario nurses expect from a new federal government. Based on the association's non-partisan and issues-oriented approach, our expectations remain the same regardless of who forms government.

In its first few weeks, the federal election campaign focused primarily on image and leadership style. RNAO encouraged the parties to change that focus, reminding them that their campaigning should be based on substantive vision, accountability, and transparency to the Canadian people. In particular we were critical of the media for treating the election as a popularity contest, a test of charisma, or, even worse, an arena for gossip and manipulation. Some reporters seemed to forget their responsibility to prepare voters with solid analysis and informed opinion.

RNAO made strong and sustained efforts to place health and health care on the political agenda this fall. On Sept. 18, we released our pre-election platform, *Putting Health First*, and called on all parties to focus their attention on the issues important to Canadians. The platform highlighted the crucial areas that shape and influence the ability of individuals, communities and the nation to be healthy. It outlined policies and programs that nurses know will lead to healthier communities, a greener environment, a stronger public health-care system, better access to nurses, and healthy economic policies. Also on

Sept. 18 we participated in a Town Hall Meeting, addressing the links between poverty and ill-health.

Given the limited attention politicians were paying to health care during their campaigns, RNAO's board of directors held a press conference on Sept. 25, demanding that poverty and health care play a much more significant role on the campaign trail. We reminded politicians that health care remains a top priority for Canadians and, according to a recent Angus Reid poll, poverty is the fourth most important factor voters consider when they decide which party to support. Our voices were heard by the media, which carried news of our call to politicians.

In our continued efforts to press important issues in the weeks leading up to the

“RNAO will watch to ensure the country's newly elected government addresses the issues that are crucial for Canadians.”

Oct. 14 vote, RNAO members hosted political debates in various locations across the province. Home office also issued a document comparing the platforms of the Conservative (not available as I write this column), Liberal, NDP and Green parties. We urged nurses and the public to learn what each party offers, and to also look at their track record.

In the months ahead, RNAO will be looking for clear recognition that we need more nurses. The federal government needs to develop a Made-in-Canada solution for the shortage, and must acknowledge that international recruitment is not the answer. We require serious investments in nursing education, including funding for infrastructure, faculty positions, more nursing seats, and

better opportunities for clinical placements for students (see our cover feature on pg. 12).

We expect real action on determinants of health such as poverty and the environment. The centrepiece of our social agenda is a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy that aims to reduce child poverty by 25 per cent in five years and 50 per cent in 10 years. Increases in the federal and provincial minimum wage (up to \$10.25/hr), as well as investments in the Canada Child Tax Benefit, early learning, child care and social housing are also vital.

On the environmental front, Canada needs to meet its obligations under the Kyoto Protocol. We must become a positive force in establishing a post-Kyoto global accord on climate change. Environmental measures, such as carbon taxes and cap-and-trade mechanisms, must be introduced. We must also tackle the chemicals in our environment that are contributing to chronic conditions such as asthma, cancer, developmental disabilities and birth defects.

Nurses, like many Canadians, have a deep and abiding attachment to the *Canada Health Act* and to the principle of a universal, single-tier health-care system. We are deeply disappointed that the federal government has not enforced the *Act* by using its power to compel provinces to provide information about how public money is being used, thus ensuring that money does not support for-profit delivery of health care. Nurses also say no to tax cuts, as they will further compromise our public services.

Our message to Canada's new government is simple and powerful: you must address the issues that are crucial for Canadians. RNAO will be front and centre ensuring that the public needs get the attention and action they deserve. Our health – and democracy – depend on it. **RN**

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