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# Gordon Campbell's Surgical Strike

By Judy Darcy

I never thought I'd say this, but Alberta Premier Ralph Klein just moved up a notch in my books.

That's because B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell just replaced Mr. Klein as public enemy No. 1 for anyone who cares about Canada's unique, publicly-funded and delivered universal health care system. For years Mr. Klein has been trying to dismantle medicare in Alberta. Now, in just a few months, B.C.'s premier has made his neighbour look like an amateur. The news from Victoria is shocking, and should horrify everyone in Canada. Mr. Campbell, who once said he had no use for private, for-profit health clinics, has announced plans to contract out thousands of surgeries to for-profit "suppliers." If Mr. Campbell gets his way, everything from mastectomies to pacemaker implants will be performed by privatized doctors, in privatized clinics.

This announcement defies all the research and recommendations in last fall's Romanow Report, which was crafted after consultations with thousands of Canadians and endorsed by the federal government. In his report, Roy Romanow stated clearly that for-profit care does not reduce waiting times, cut costs or improve health care. In fact, for-profit clinics do just the opposite.

According to recent studies in both the Canadian Medical Association Journal and the Journal of the American Medical Association, patients are more likely to die prematurely in private, for-profit hospitals and clinics than in not-for-profit settings. As for waiting lists, Mr. Campbell's option doesn't save time, it wastes it -- and he doesn't have to look far for proof. A 1999 Alberta Consumers' Association study found that in Calgary, where all cataract surgery is done in private clinics, patients faced an average wait of 16 to 24 weeks. Meanwhile, in Edmonton, with fewer eye surgeons and 80 per cent of surgeries performed at public hospitals, wait times averaged five to seven weeks.

The people who benefit most from private care are not the patients, but the privateers. Often they benefit on the backs of the patients, siphoning money away from care. In the U.S., the General Accounting Office estimates that as much as one-10th of health-care spending is lost to fraud. The FBI calls it "a growing trend" and has set up a special health-fraud unit. Canadians are already getting in on the act, too. Just look at the King's Health Centre scandal, in which the owners of the Toronto clinic were convicted of fraud totalling almost \$100-million.

Maybe Mr. Campbell wants the devastation of medicare to be his legacy. But what about Prime Minister Jean Chretien? It seems he's content to make it his legacy, too. There's certainly no evidence to prove otherwise. Mr. Campbell promises to respect the Canada Health Act, despite the fact that his plans go against all five principles of the act. Universality? Hardly. Accessibility? Definitely not. Portability? Only if you've got the money. Public administration? Quite the opposite. Comprehensiveness? No, again.

Unless Mr. Chretien wants to go down in the history books as the prime minister who allowed privatized health care, he must act now. If not, it's only a matter of time before our entire health care system is infiltrated by American multinationals, which know a lot more about privatized health care than we do. That's because Chapter 11 of the North American Free Trade Agreement allows equal access to American companies whenever a public Canadian institution like health care is put on the auction block. NAFTA does not respect borders, especially provincial ones, so Mr. Campbell's decision to open up contracts for surgeries will have an effect on everyone across the country.

Prime Minister, for the sake of our health, establish an immediate moratorium on all health care privatization, and speak out for a strong Canada Health Act like the kind you supported at the beginning of your political career.

As for you, Premier Campbell, I'll be coming to visit you personally, as one of your province's newest full-time residents. Unless you look out your Legislature window, you might not see me. But you'll definitely hear me, loud and clear. "Not a penny for profit!"

***Judy Darcy is national president of the 535,000-member Canadian Union of Public Employees.***