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Don't be conned by Harper and Martin on medicare

By Murray Dobbin

This election may go down in history as a contest between two accomplished fraud artists.

Paul Martin and Stephen Harper are both promising to save medicare. For sheer gall these pledges deserve an award. What they don't deserve is to be taken seriously because history shows both men are committed to the privatization of medicare.

In the days when he was busy wiping out the deficit Paul Martin gutted Ottawa's contribution to medicare by 40 per cent and he eliminated the Established Program Funding legislation - the foundation of universality. By cutting spending he created a provincial funding crisis, and by repealing the legislation, he cut the provinces loose opening the door to creeping privatization. He then refused to use a string of large budget surpluses to restore long term funding to medicare.

Now, suddenly, he says the money is there. Maybe. But unfortunately, it is headed for private health corporations. Health minister Pierre Pettigrew, made it clear that private clinics are on the way. Paul Martin hired Hill & Knowlton's Bruce Young, a prominent lobbyist for health care privatization, as a senior campaign organizer in B.C.

He recruited Alliance MP Keith Martin into the Liberal caucus and the new recruit immediately enthused that the most exciting thing about the new prime minister was that he was not wedded to the Canada Health Act.

B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell already knew that. After passing legislation to police private medical clinics he suddenly refused to put the new law into effect last December. Why? Because the new prime minister told him he would be more flexible interpreting the Canada Health Act. And Paul Martin has appointed a parliamentary secretary just to promote public private partnerships. John Mckay asked rhetorically "Why should the public own hospitals?"

As for Stephen Harper, he developed the Reform Party's policy of "provincializing" health care, a euphemism for repealing the Canada Health Act. For twenty years Harper has been an enthusiastic supporter of the National Citizens Coalition, founded explicitly to oppose universal medicare. It published ads warning: "More people will die" if the Canada Health Act was passed. Harper was president of the NCC for four years and boasted about its influence, declaring: "Universality ...is virtually dead as a concept in most areas of public policy."

Harper's current medicare platform is full of calculated ambiguity. He says: "No one should be denied necessary medical service because of inability to pay." But just what is "medically necessary?" Privatizers say it means catastrophic illness only. Mr Harper says: "It does not matter who delivers health care." In short get ready for corporate hospitals. Nothing has changed, except the spin.

If medicare is really important to Canadians, they had better look elsewhere if they want to keep it. These two men can't be trusted.