

True leadership eludes medicare

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EDITORIAL

When Jean Chrétien met last week with the premiers, many Canadians were hoping he might buck expectations and throw up some roadblocks to the creeping privatization of our health-care system. Alas, he did not.

The premiers walked away, grumbling as always that Ottawa had failed to give them enough money to deal with the growing health-care needs.

They were totally silent, though, on the biggest single threat to health care in Canada — the movement by provinces, including Ontario, to allow more and more private operators to open clinics, build hospitals and, in general, to get a bigger foothold into our public health-care system.

In fact, the issue was considered so controversial that it wasn't even put on the agenda. Clearly, neither Chrétien, Ontario Premier Ernie Eves or any of the other "leaders" had the courage to tackle this issue that threatens the very foundations of our cherished medicare system.

Their failure comes as Ontario Health Minister Tony Clement, who wants to build hospitals in partnerships with the private, for-profit sector, is set to approve more private diagnostic tests for MRIs and CT scans.

Clement defends his position on more private sector involvement by saying Ontario can have new hospitals without having to build or maintain new buildings. But he fails to mention that private corporations don't build hospitals or clinics just because they like us.

However, Canadians who care about medicare can fight privatization.

In Ontario, they can pressure Clement to live up to a promise he made last year that he'd only go ahead with privatization if there was proof it would be better, cheaper, faster and safer. Where's the proof?

Also, Ontario voters should pay close attention to Eves, who is preparing to campaign this spring on a Harris-style pledge to cut taxes even more.

How is that possible when just last week he was crying that Ottawa had failed to give Ontario the money it needs to make our medical system work, to avoid waiting lines for tests, to buy new equipment? Surely if Eves feels so strongly about the health system, he would pump more money into it, instead of simply letting the private sector come in and run it so his provincial budget looks "balanced."

Last time we looked, the money for public health care in this country came out of the taxpayers' pockets — not from Queen's Park or Ottawa.

Federally, it is also obvious Chrétien doesn't feel strongly enough about preserving Canada's public health-care system to fight for it.

Canadians will instead now have to focus on Paul Martin. As the heir-apparent to Chrétien as prime minister, we have a right to know exactly where he stands on this issue.

Canadians are searching for a leader to champion our public health-care system. It's a role Martin could fill. Whether he wants to or not is in doubt.