

The truth about Sweden: Proponents of private medicine told everyone the socialist country was embracing for-profit hospitals, but now we know it wasn't true.

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VANCOUVER - Last summer, the Canadian media were awash with stories about how the socialist Swedes had supposedly turned their back on public ownership, most notably by selling their major public hospitals to corporations. Not surprisingly, researchers associated with right-wing think-tanks were quick to jump on the story. After all, with Sweden's history of international business success and socialist government, it is associated with all things both efficient and egalitarian. If for-profit hospitals work there, why can't they work in Canada?

Given the impending release of the Romanow report, and Alberta's recent decision to license Canada's first for-profit hospital equipped to perform major surgery, it is worth revisiting this story, both to correct an important misunderstanding and to find out how the story turned out.

Many of the press accounts from last summer regrettably confused "Swedish" with "socialist." Most stories featured the decision of Stockholm County Council to turn over operation of St. Goran's hospital to a private firm and to contract out an increasing volume of care to other private facilities. However, few of the stories noted that Stockholm County was governed by a coalition of parties led by the Moderates (Sweden's equivalent of our Canadian Alliance party). Shut out of power nationally and in most local councils, the Moderates chose to use their position in Stockholm, where they won control of both the county and city councils, to showcase their agenda of public restraint and privatization.

Far from turning their back on public provision, socialists vigorously opposed the "Stockholm agenda." In the health sector, the Social Democratic government (supported by the Communists and Greens) issued a moratorium blocking further hospital privatizations until this fall.

During the summer election campaign, they highlighted the Moderates' privatization program in Stockholm and asked voters for a strong mandate to fight for a health-care system owned by the public, not corporations, and run in the public interest, not in the interest of those most profitable to serve.

So how has the Stockholm county experiment turned out? The financial world has certainly not been impressed by the Moderate-led council. Standard and Poor's lowered Stockholm county's debt rating last fall.

In terms of patient care, there have also been worrying signs. There have been allegations that the private hospitals and clinics in Stockholm are predisposed to cream-skimming, making it more difficult for seriously ill patients to get care.

Politically, the decision has turned out even worse for the Moderates.

Far from attracting voters with its Stockholm showcase, the party suffered its worst performance since 1973 in the Sept. 15 election.

Meanwhile, the Social Democrats strengthened their grip on power at the national level and ousted the Moderates and their allies from control of both Stockholm county and Stockholm city councils.

Political parties in Sweden run on platforms that voters expect them to implement. The strengthened national coalition led by the Social Democrats will make the temporary moratorium on further hospital privatizations permanent. In post-victory interviews, the new leader of Stockholm County Council interpreted the vote as sending one message above all else: Stop the giant sell-off in health care. This does not mean there will be no private-sector presence whatsoever in Swedish health care, but the public has soundly rejected the notion of a health-care system in which for-profit facilities play a leading role.

Last summer, Canada's private-health lobby held Sweden up as an efficient and egalitarian society willing to embrace for-profit hospitals. In fact, it was only a narrow right-of-centre political coalition that made that choice. Swedes have rejected both it and its for-profit hospitals. Take it from the roughly 6.7 million Swedish experts on efficiency and egalitarianism who voted on Sept. 15: Private hospitals and the public interest do not mix.

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