

Challenges for a Conservative minority

The new federal Conservative government's minority position means it will not be able to do anything too drastic, says a professor of political science at the University of Windsor.

"To the extent that [Prime Minister-elect Stephen Harper] wants to undo any of the federal/provincial deals, that is going to be very hard to do," says Heather MacIvor. Although the Health Accord that the Liberals negotiated with the provinces in 2004 is not legally binding, for example, "there is a certain amount of political capital invested, especially on the provincial side," says MacIvor, a researcher on the rebuilding of the Conservative Party.

Any tampering would throw funding promises — some of which were guaranteed over 10 years — out the window. "It would be an incredible hornet's test for Harper to stir up," she said.

The Conservatives won 124 seats in the Jan. 23 election. The Liberals were reduced to 103, the Bloc Québécois dropped to 51, the NDP moved up to 29, and 1 MP, André Arthur, won a seat

as an Independent. (Recounts are pending for some results.)

The majority government requires 155 seats, meaning that Harper will have to forge coalitions with other parties in the Commons, likely on an issue-by-issue basis, to remain in power.

In the early weeks of campaigning, Harper promised that any changes he made to medicare would comply with the principles of the Canada Health Act. "Anything less is the violation of a sacrosanct commitment that all governments have made to Canadians," he said.

"We must treat all patients equally for essential health care services, regardless of ability to pay — anything less is un-Canadian."

Only 4 of the 11 doctors who ran for federal office were elected — all 4 were sitting MPs. Dr. Carolyn Bennett (Toronto's St. Paul's riding), Dr. Bernard Patry (Quebec's Pierrefonds-Dollard), Dr. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre) and Dr. Keith Martin (BC's Esquimalt–Juan de Fuca) were all re-elected for the Liberals.

The 7 defeated physicians were:

- Conservative candidate Dr. Bob Mullan, who lost to Liberal Scott Brison in Nova Scotia's Kings–Hants;

- Liberal Dr. Robert Vaughan, in Ontario's Prince Edward–Hastings riding;
- Dr. Gordon Guyatt, an NDP candidate in the Ontario riding of Ancaster–Dundas–Flamborough–Westdale;
- Dr. Martin Plaisance, an NDP candidate in Quebec's Sherbrooke riding;
- Dr. Richard Mathias, who ran for the Green Party in BC's Richmond riding;
- Dr. Chris Milburn, a Green candidate in Nova Scotia's Sydney–Victoria; and
- Dr. Ron Matsusaki, trying for the Greens in PEI's Egmont riding.

— Laura Eggertson and Barbara Sibbald, *CMAJ*

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.060109

News @ a glance

Closed book: Health Canada plans to halve its budget at 6 Ottawa health science libraries and reduce staff from 26 to 10 over the next 3 years. At the same time the department will create an electronic library in collaboration with the National Research Council at a cost of \$41.8 million over 5 years. The move is part of a federal effort to trim \$269 million from the department's budget. The Canadian Health Library Association says federal scientists can't do their jobs without timely access to scientific publications. "It's a big loss for scientists and researchers," says CHLA President Tamsin Addams-Webber. Without library access, many individuals and departments may have to purchase resources directly. The cuts "could be a false economy," says Addams-Webber.

The Lottery: A Quebec coroner wants lottery ticket vendors to be trained to help combat compulsive gambling. The recommendations stem from an investigation into the Aug. 21, 2005, suicide of 62-year-old André Baril. The Carignan man killed himself after spending his life savings of \$50 000 primarily on a lottery game called Banco. Like vendors of alcohol, people who sell lottery tickets "are responsible for the welfare of their customers," wrote coroner Jean-François Dorval. He says lotto retailers

Promises, promises

During the 56-day election campaign, Stephen Harper vowed "there will be no private, parallel system" of health care under the Conservatives' stewardship. There will, however, be "real reform and real change." The Tories promised to:

- comply with the principles of the Canada Health Act
- work with the provinces to "allow for a mix of public and private health care delivery, as long as health care remains publicly funded and universally accessible"
- create a Patient Wait-Times Guarantee to ensure essential medical treatment within clinically acceptable times — or allow treatment in another jurisdiction
- establish wait-time reduction targets by the end of 2006 (instead of 2007 as scheduled)
- expand educational programs for health care professionals
- improve access to natural and complementary health products and supplements
- finance a \$260-million, 5-year Canadian Strategy for Cancer Control
- immediately compensate people who contracted hepatitis C from tainted blood
- introduce a National Disability Act
- spend 1% of all federal health funding annually promoting physical activity
- provide tax credits of up to \$500 annually for parents of children enrolled in programs promoting physical activity
- abandon Kyoto Protocol targets in favour of a new Clean Air Act