

Appendix 1: Suppressed news story

Two-tier Tony Clement appointed new minister of health

Date: Feb 7, 2006 Time: 11:00 am

Former Ontario health minister Tony Clement, once dubbed "two-tier Tony" for his oft-stated belief there must be more "choice in health care," has been appointed federal Minister of Health for the newly minted Conservative government.

Clement's duties will include responsibility for public health, a junior-minister position that was obliterated in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's streamlining of cabinet yesterday.

Critics immediately tabbed the 45-year-old lawyer's appointment as an omen for further devolution of federal authority in health care and disinterest in enforcing the principles of the Canada Health Act.

"It's quite shocking," said Mike McBane, executive director of the Canadian Health Coalition, an advocacy group for a public health system. "It sends a very clear signal, that the Prime Minister would appoint someone who is ideologically committed to privatizing the delivery of the public health care system, someone who was aggressively involved in dismantling the Ontario health care system, in firing nurses and shutting down hospitals."

Ontario Health Coalition Director Natalie Mehra said Canadians should be "deeply concerned," given Clement's support for the privatization and deregulation of long-term care facilities and for the creation of for-profit hospitals in Brantford and Ottawa, during his tenure as the province's health minister from February 2001 to October 2003. As minister, Clement also approved a private cancer care clinic in Toronto.

Clement was also front and centre in the Ontario government's handling of the SARS crisis, during which time he was lauded for able administration and a candid admission that the public health system was "close to collapse." Critics duly noted the system's deterioration was self-inflicted, as it had been gutted by Tory government measures that included laying off thousands of nurses, as well as scientists in provincial health labs, scant months after Clement assumed the portfolio.

CMA President Dr. Ruth Collins-Nakai said Canada's new health minister brings a wealth of experience to the post and faces a number of challenges.

Clement told reporters his top priority will be to implement the Conservative election promise to develop a Patient Wait Times Guarantee. He also quashed the notion that as a former provincial health minister, he'll be more willing to pitch for bigger transfers, saying "we've got the first minister's meeting in place and now the issue is how do we make sure the money is leveraged for the benefit of patients and Canadians generally." The Conservative platform vowed to develop a guarantee in conjunction with the provinces to "ensure that all Canadians receive essential medical treatment within clinically acceptable waiting times, or can be treated in another jurisdiction."

Other health care planks included commitments to: establish evidence-based benchmarks for acceptable wait times, starting with cancer treatment, cardiac procedures, diagnostic imaging procedures, joint replacement and sight restoration; develop comprehensive plans to prevent and treat cancer, mental illness and heart disease, including \$260 million over 5 years for a Canadian Strategy for Cancer Control; bolster educational programs for doctors, nurses and other health professionals; financially compensate those who contracted hepatitis C through tainted blood; ease access to natural health products; and introduce a National Disability Act that includes easier access to medical care and equipment.

In abolishing the Ministry of State (Public Health), established in December 2003 to oversee the creation of a Public Health Agency of Canada and other public health programming, Harper sought a smaller, "more focused and effective" cabinet.

Harper's decision to axe the position "goes against what I think a lot of the provinces have learned," says Dr. Carolyn Bennett, the out-going minister.

"The job of the Health Minister is very much caught up in the best possible repair shop in a sickness care system, from formularies to funding to health reform. It's very hard to put the attention on the prevention piece," she said in an interview from her Toronto riding office.

Under the previous government's tenure, Canada made "huge strides" and invested more than \$1 billion in public health by creating the Public Health Agency of Canada, appointing Dr. David Butler Jones and funding immunization programs, public health infrastructure and integrated disease strategies, she says. "We'll be watching carefully from the other side if anybody tries to take anything away."

Clement's experience with SARS will doubtless have taught him about the importance of issues such as pandemic preparedness, says Bennett. But having a separate minister who has the time and brings a public profile to health prevention and profile is critical in combating the "other epidemics" of diabetes, cancer and heart disease, she adds.

It's also critical that the federal government takes the time to liaise with the provinces on improving the determinants of health.

"It's been important to have somebody at the Cabinet table who really fights for these things but also understands the whole of government responsibilities," she says.

Among public health measures in the Conservative platform were vows to provide a \$500 tax credit to cover the costs of participation in sport and fitness programs, and a commitment to spend 1% of total health funding annually on physical activity, including amateur sport and programs for school-aged children. Clement, who has previously been Ontario's minister of municipal affairs and housing, environment and transportation, will also assume responsibility for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario in the new cabinet. — Wayne Kondro, Ottawa