

Alberta's Election, Power, People and the Health System

Tuesday, May 5th is election day in Alberta. What will it mean for the health system?

Obviously no matter what happens at the polls, there will be changes.

The PCs have been in the position to be campaigning for some time as Mr. Prentice knew when the election was going to be held. The tactics to undercut and disarm the Wildrose were intended to reduce the risk for the PCs and adding to that, the spectre of multi-billion dollar deficits as a result of the dramatic drop in oil prices provided the justification to ask Alberta's electorate for a new mandate. It actually is Mr. Prentice's first such test as his claim to the Premier's chair came through winning the leadership of the PC party. His decision to pick two citizens to enter his cabinet to take over Education and Health before they had been successful in winning seats in the legislature also seemed like a good tactic at the time.

The approach to this election by Mr. Prentice and the PCs has been consistent. It has never been about the people of Alberta. It has been about power and keeping it. The disregard for the democratic process with Ministerial appointments and the attendant governmental support to win by-elections was the beginning. The welcoming of floor crossers, and then his reduction of support for most of them in the party as the local constituents' backlash became apparent was also telling. It was not about the people of Alberta but about maintaining power. Now the polls indicate the people are pushing back.

There is no doubt that many Albertans have been affected by the downturn in oil prices. Certainly the headlines continue to note job layoffs but one has to question how much it is affecting the province's treasury really. Last fall, after the first round of dire predictions, instead of a multi-billion dollar deficit the quarterly report actually came out with over \$400 million in surplus. Quickly it was explained that the real impact had not hit yet as the report reached back to a time when the situation was not at its worst. Very likely true but what is the real financial situation? The price for oil in Canadian dollars is not the same as it is in Texas in American dollars. The drop in the Canadian dollar to the 80 cent range versus the U.S. dollar has had a mitigating effect but we don't know how much really.

We do know that Mr. Mandel and Mr. Prentice have used these economic circumstances to justify dramatic changes in the way cancer is treated in Calgary and southern Alberta. The decades long planned and promised Tom Baker Cancer Centre expansion was cancelled completely. Then after an apparent politically appropriate interval and the public raised questions, new facilities were announced at the South Health Campus Hospital. The public was put in a position to have to pick between nothing, or driving 30+km to reportedly cheaper parking facilities. The group who have built up \$200 million in commitments toward the Calgary Foothills expansion properly pointed out that the location was critical and withdrew their support. If world leading cancer research and treatment were going to continue, it had to be at the same location. They also pointed out there was space for parking contemplated not so far away.

It is very important to note that neither the people at the University of Calgary/Foothills Hospital nor the people at the South Health Campus knew of these announcements in advance. Both were surprised at each announcement. Mr. Prentice has put a price tag on the difference between the U of C location versus and SHC. A price that has risen over time, perhaps in part due to the fact that the group with the \$200 million commitment properly pointed out that their money would not travel the 30+km out to the SHC. Where are these costing numbers coming from? Certainly not from the people involved at the two locations given that they were as surprised as everyone else.

Now, with the announced budget on which Mr. Prentice is asking for his mandate, there is a "Phase II" expansion of cancer treatment capacity for the Tom Baker Centre. Given all that has taken place with the announcements to date, does anyone really believe this is more than a to be forgotten election promise?

Minister Mandel has also announced some decentralizing of the structure of the health system. There will be 8-10 zones established across the province where new advisory boards will be established to provide "meaningful input" into the operation of these zones. AHS CEO Vickie Kaminski's public clarification of the role of these committees leaves absolutely no doubt that they will be advisory only. The real decision making power remains where it is.

The Mr. Prentice talks over and over again (especially with the rise in the NDP popularity in the polls) about the need for stability in this province. His actions have consistently been to take greater control and pulling more power inward. His other handpicked cabinet Minister, Minister Dirks has reached past locally elected Trustees into school board rooms. There he announced he is taking control of carefully set aside contingency funds planned to be used locally to soften the blows of volatile and unreliable provincial education funding. This kind of stability is not in the best interest of Albertans, either in health services or in the rest of Alberta.

What Albertan's need is the opportunity to be appropriately informed and then meaningfully engaged in the workings and the future of Alberta?

In Alberta's health system world, its culture is command and control. It is protective of its decision making and of the information in order to avoid accountability. Characteristics that fully reflect the past and present PC approach to govern.

What does the vision for the health system look like as portrayed through the election campaign?

Clearly the PCs intend to maintain firm political control and make decisions behind closed doors while keeping the public in the dark on matters of finances, capital spending and people management. They will continue make politically opportunistic decisions while withholding information and avoiding accountability. Cuts have been announced to the overall budget but people inside the system know that many of the immediate outcomes have been kneejerk reactions still reinforcing the command and control culture. There has been no effort to consult the people that know and can help deliver efficiencies. The culture is not changing nor expected to change to Patient and Family Centred Care.

There is more lip service to this in order to appear to hear the public call for it but the actions are very limited and are not designed to be durable.

The NDP, who the polls have indicated are the leading contender to become a new government, are clearly taking the position that the PC's funding cuts will be reversed and there will be more spending in areas where there are shortages of facilities, or long waitlists. This certainly will create a much more comfortable environment for the leadership and the staff in the health system. It also will reinforce that more of the same is ok. For patients and families, this is not good. While having more equipment, more facilities and more money may provide the capacity to do more work, it will not change the culture of the system itself. It is a "treatment system" not a "care" system. There are tremendous people doing great work, in spite of the command and control culture. These people need to be unshackled to safely and freely lead in providing care to families and patients. The announced NDP approach will not move in this direction and indeed will reinforce the opposite.

Wildrose through its leader Brian Jean and his recent tragic experience with his son, clearly knows that the culture of the system is not healthy. The decision makers and managers are facing reduction in number and a much tougher fiscal regime ahead. It is not clear how all of this will be accomplished. They are committed to moving toward local decision making. Moving the system out from under provincial politician's control is critical if the system is to move toward working with and serving patients and families. The Wildrose platform does include implementing a number of the recommended improvements noted in the [Heath Quality Council of Alberta's Continuity of Care report](#). These recommendations are very important in improving patient care.

Dr. David Swann has spoken of a comprehensive program for changing the health system to the health care system. He has made clear that provincial political management must cease. Dr. Swann's vision obviously is rooted in what he has seen through his experience with the system.

Greg Clark and the Alberta Party list good priorities in its health policy. The broad principles of consultation and accountability along with the intention to establish local decision making are a solid foundation. Certainly this is a contrast to Mr. Prentice's and a number of past PC Premiers and to the apparent NDP approach.

This election, just as should be the case with health "care", is about people versus power. Are politicians elected to rule and to control, or are they to consult, collaborate and build on the strengths of the people of the province. Are elected officials public servants, or is the public to serve them?

There are many tactics that are used to maintain or to get the power. Mr. Prentice has used a variety of them to try to keep the power he inherited after winning the PC leadership contest. Ms. Notley, whether intentional or not, is using more taxpayer money as one of hers along with the need for change of government. Others are more direct by citing the past government politicians' actions and record. Only the Alberta Party and Greg Clark actually are running on their own beliefs.

So on Wednesday morning will we be facing more of the same with existing command and control in place with either less or more money? Or will we see the possibility of fundamental cultural change of

the health system toward true patient and family centred care, either through dramatic changes in management in the short term, or through a broader (even minority government) collaborative commitment to move out from political opportunism to a fully transparent and publicly accountable, patient and family centred “care” system? This time more than ever, it is up to the people of Alberta to decide.