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Conservatives vow health care guarantee



REUTERS

Conservative Party of Canada leader Stephen Harper walks past a sign that says 'smile' as he walks off his campaign bus following a campaign stop where he announced the party's health care platform in Winnipeg, December 2, 2005. REUTERS/J. P. Moczulski

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By David Ljunggren

OTTAWA (Reuters) - The main opposition Conservative Party, regularly accused of planning to scrap Canada's creaking publicly funded health care system, promised on Friday to cut wait times for treatment if elected, but stressed it would not create a parallel private network.

The Conservatives -- bidding to end 12 years of Liberal rule in the January 23 election -- have had great trouble persuading Canadians that they want to improve rather than kill off the national medicare system.

Medicare gives Canadians the right to free medical treatment. Although it swallows close to C\$90 billion a year in public funds, waiting times are growing and there are increasingly serious shortages of family doctors and nurses.

The concept of changing medicare is one of the most radioactive topics in Canadian politics, although most parties agree the system needs some kind of a major overhaul.

Conservative leader Stephen Harper said he would work with the provinces to guarantee that people get care within a reasonable time or be entitled to go outside their province if necessary to get it. Spokeswoman Carolyn Stewart-Olsen said this could even mean treatment in the United States if necessary.

Harper also praised the practice whereby some private clinics provide services paid for by public money. But he stressed there would not be a separate private health system guaranteeing faster treatment for those who can afford it.

"There will be no private, parallel system," he said at a campaign stop in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Private medical facilities have already been set up in various provinces. The Liberals have on occasion threatened to cut off funds to the provinces unless the clinics cease operations but Prime Minister Paul Martin refused at a Toronto news conference on Friday to say he would shut them down.

Martin also scoffed at Harper and said he could not be trusted.

He said that in the 1950s his father Paul Martin Sr., a cabinet minister at the time, had brought in the beginnings of the public health system. Martin himself made wait times a centerpiece of the 2004 election and then arranged for C\$41 billion in new funding for the health system.

"Stephen Harper's never been there. And now all of a sudden he's going to tell us that a conversion on the road to Damascus has taken place? Give me a break!" Martin said.

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The left-leaning New Democrats, who kept Martin in power for over a year until last month, said the Liberals have failed to protect medicare.

"We want our health care system to be one where it's your health care card that gets you the health care -- not your credit card," said New Democrat leader Jack Layton.

"Mr. Martin and the Liberals ... are letting private for-profit medicare grow. Stephen Harper now proposes to encourage it even further. It's not acceptable."

Layton is an important figure because opinion polls show that after the election, his party might once again be in a position to keep the Liberals in power.

A Strategic Counsel survey for the Globe and Mail newspaper on Friday showed 35 percent of decided voters backed the Liberals, while 30 percent favor the Conservatives. The New Democrat Party (NDP) was supported by 17 percent.

An SES/CPAC poll gave the Liberals 37 percent; the Conservatives 29 percent; the NDP 15 percent.

Under Canada's first-past-the-post system, a party needs to gather at least 40 percent of the votes to have a realistic chance of winning a majority of the 308 seats in Parliament.

When Martin's government fell on Monday over a corruption scandal, the Liberals had 133 seats.

(Additional reporting by Randall Palmer with Martin campaign)

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