

# Privatization fight fuels Canadian election

by Colleen Fuller



Canadians will trudge to the polls Jan. 23 in an unusual – and, many argue, unwanted – winter election to determine who will form the next government of Canada. The election came about when a coalition in Parliament imploded over a disagreement on health care privatization.

In Canada's House of Commons, four political parties currently hold seats: the Liberals, the Conservatives, the New Democratic Party (NDP), and the Bloc Québécois (based only in the province of Québec). After the June 2004 elections, when no party emerged with a decided majority, the Liberals were able to form the government only with the support of the left-leaning NDP.

Since minority governments often allow smaller, progressive parties to wield influence and to advance neglected issues, the NDP flexed its muscles this April and supported the Liberal budget only if a \$4.6 billion corporate tax cut was canceled and the money was allocated to social programs. The result was attention to housing, foreign aid, wage protection for workers in bankrupt companies, tuition fee reductions, and improved energy efficiency – and the Liberals remained in office.

But seven months later, when the NDP tried to push the government to halt the rapid increase in health care privatization, the Liberals refused. The NDP then pulled its support, brought the Liberals down, and pitched the country in to a winter election.

If, as predicted, the Jan. 23 election returns another stalemated minority Parliament, Canadians may have endured the spate of shivering, door-

knocking campaigners with little difference to show for it.

Linda Silas, RN, president of the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU), believes nurses have a special election role to play as advocates for a strengthened public system in both payment and delivery of services.

“Registered nurses are the most trusted people on the health care issue, so they need to speak up during the election,” Silas said. “My job [as the president of CFNU] is to give those RNs the courage to go to their neighbors and other health care workers to convince those voters that health care needs support.”

Silas emphasizes that the CFNU is nonpartisan and doesn't endorse any political party. But that doesn't mean the organization doesn't have its own political message to the politicians.

“Some of the politicians are supporting tax cuts,” she said. “But you can't say you're in favor of tax cuts and then say you're going to have the best health care system in the world. It's a contradiction.” The problem is when politicians go for the 30-second news clip, she said.

News media asked party leaders about private health care, and their responses mirror the waffling and doublespeak of politicians the world over:

■ Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper responded, “I would do, my friends, what every one of you would do. You would go to wherever you could to get care for your loved ones. That's what you would do.”

■ NDP leader Jack Layton said his party would not support legislation barring private clinics from operating, as long as they did not receive public funds. “Our focus,” he told reporters, “is to keep public health care dollars going to public and nonprofit facilities.”

■ Liberal Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh, who failed to secure NDP support for the budget, said, “We've been saying for a year and a half, ever since I have been a minister of health, our preference is public delivery.” He added that public delivery “is determined by the provinces and if they determine that these clinics are to go on then they have to live within the confines of the [Canada Health] Act.”

“Health care isn't a push-button thing,” said Silas. “We need to push back on privatization, to demand that candidates give us a time frame for the reduction in the number of private, for-profit clinics and more appropriate funding allocations to re-enforce access to high quality services in the public system.”

Health care is sure to remain high on the list of concerns among the electorate – both during and after the election. Silas said nurses can and must play a key role in the debates.

“There is no better ally of the health care system than grassroots nurses,” she said. “We need to push the candidates to commit to change, to tell us they'll work with the provinces to enhance and expand universal public health care.”