

PM pledges major reform to health-care system

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Prime Minister Paul Martin charted a new course of federal action on health care Friday, unveiling details of a 10-year reform plan that he says will fix the ailing system.

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Although he has stayed away from setting an election date, Mr. Martin used his lunchtime speech in downtown Toronto to lay out a list long-term governing priorities, headed by health care.

"Any discussion of our government's priorities must begin with health care for there is no other issue of such vital and visceral significance to Canadians," Mr. Martin said. "The federal government has already committed \$37-billion in new money to health care over five years. That represents a better than 8 per cent annual increase in spending. And I tell you today that we will invest more."

The Prime Minister said he is committed to hammering out the plan when he holds a health-care summit with the premiers this summer.

"We're finished with the year-to-year scramble for short-term solutions," Martin said. "What the provinces need now is a long-term agreement that guarantees predictable, reliable funding. What we all need is a fundamental commitment to reform."

There were hints that while the initiative will provide the provinces with the additional funding they have been seeking, it will be under strict federal control that have drawn the ire of Alberta and Quebec.

"Canada needs real reform that delivers real results," Mr. Martin said. "Right now we all can see how well the health care system is working and where it needs improvement."

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Mr. Martin touched on specific targets in health-care reform, including reducing wait times, primary-care renewal, establishing a program for home and community-care services and a developing a national pharmaceuticals strategy.

"Health care is this government's No. 1 priority," he said. "We will come to an agreement with the provinces, because we must. We will implement a long-term plan, because we must. And because we must, we will provide a fix for a generation."

Mr. Martin also told the audience of Empire Club and Canadian Club members that his government will push ahead on the other pillars of his government's vision: learning, aboriginal policy, cities and foreign affairs.

The government has given municipalities full relief from the GST as part of the so-called "New Deal" for cities and Mr. Martin said Friday that talks on sharing a portion of the federal tax on gasoline will happen before the end of the year.

"The federal government will ask the premiers and municipal leaders to start discussions on how our cities and towns should be provided with the resources they need," Mr. Martin said. "We'll be talking about more innovative partnerships that would enable us to better deal with the huge infrastructure deficit the country and its municipalities confront."

The Prime Minister also said Friday that the time has come for the government to forge a new partnership with aboriginal leadership.

Aboriginal leaders from across the country will be in Ottawa on Monday to meet with Mr. Martin and more than 20 other government ministers.

"This will be an important summit," Mr. Martin said. "Its message must be that the changes we all want to see will not be measured in rhetoric, they will be measured in meaningful improvements in quality-of-life indicators — better health care and housing."

"Quite simply, we need a new beginning — let it be this Monday."

