

Slow fix for medicare

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Prime Minister Paul Martin promised, in this year's election campaign, that he would meet the premiers this summer and agree with them on measures which would "fix medicare for a generation."

Now it appears that what he really meant was that it might take a generation to fix medicare.

Martin now says that next month's formal three-day conference with the premiers might be just the first of many meetings before an agreement can be reached. So much for fixing anything, except the dates of more conferences, stretching away far into the misty future.

During the campaign we said in this space, with considerable skepticism, that Martin was promising to fix medicare while somehow vowing not to change it. He wants Ottawa to continue paying only a small fraction of medicare's rising costs, and yet forbids the provinces from trying health-care delivery experiments which might help control costs.

Martin's celebrated fix for a generation, which Canadians took on trust when re-electing his Liberals, remains as vague as an angel. In fact the only new proposal anyone has made since the election has come from the premiers, in the form of a cynically calculated proposal that Ottawa pony up a good \$7.6 billion a year - the real cost would be closer to \$11 billion - for pharmacare. This would, of course, be in addition to the other money the provinces are already demanding Ottawa toss into the kitty.

No doubt there are ways to make pharmacare - government subsidies to users of prescription medicine - more efficient and less costly, and that's a fine medium-term goal, although we not convinced that centralizing the process in Ottawa is ideal. But whatever the theoretical merits of pharmacare, for the premiers to propose in in this form right now is just a crude political stunt.

So: there's not enough money to maintain the old jalopy the family drives, but the kids clamour for Dad to get it fixed anyway. And then they suddenly demand that he buy them a new sports car, too. Dad reacts angrily, and says everyone will have to take the bus.

Martin did pretty much that by sending Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh to crash a provincial ministers' meeting and reject the pharmacare ploy and by signalling that if the premiers are going to act this way, perhaps they'll have to wait for any more money at all.

Now in turn, some provincial leaders are sulking, with Alberta's Ralph Klein saying he'll likely spend just one day at the conference.

Well, Klein is in full pre-election posturing mode now, and no premier ever lost votes by campaigning against Ottawa. If Martin ever imagined that the premiers would bow abjectly to his will, he's learning differently now. The prime minister demonized Klein during the election campaign, as a way to score points against Stephen Harper - Klein and Harper had a "secret agenda" to destroy medicare, remember? A popular premier can have a long memory.

Similarly, Martin might now be reaping in resentment what he sowed by promising, without bothering to consult the premiers (or for that matter any broadcasters) to put the whole three-

day circus on TV next month. Little things like that can make agreement hard to reach.

But although Martin is right to give the back of his hand to the pharmacare scheme, he is on shakier ground if he's saying - it's not easy to tell, with Martin - that he will stall on coming up with the money he has already promised. Here we sympathize with Quebec Premier Jean Charest, who says Martin must come to the Ottawa meeting with cash - at least the \$9 billion he has already promised to put into the system.

The premiers' pharmacare ploy was fundamentally dishonest; they cannot have expected Ottawa to agree, even though Martin did speak, in the campaign, about pharmacare. He campaigned more strongly on reducing medical waiting lists, which is plainly a provincial responsibility - and which should be: Does anyone really want operating-room schedules in Chicoutimi to be set in Ottawa?

There is blame enough to go around in this impasse. If next month's meeting is to be salvaged, both sides will have to stop posturing and start compromising.

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