

Oral Questions

INTRODUCTION OF NEW HEALTH ACT

Right Hon. P. E. Trudeau (Prime Minister): Madam Speaker, now the Leader of the Opposition is making a positive suggestion. He wants me to intervene with the Kremlin and get them to accept our note. First, I will have to talk to them. Then I will have to make sure that they will listen to me. They will not listen to me, nor can I talk to them, if I just continue shouting at them and treating them as murderers. That is my point, Madam Speaker.

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MEDICAL CARE

PAYMENT OF PREMIUMS—EFFECT ON UNIVERSALITY OF PROGRAM

Mr. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg-Birds Hill): Madam Speaker, my question is directed to the Minister of National Health and Welfare. She is quoted as saying that she thinks that what has been occurring in Alberta in the last week is crazy. She obviously disapproves of it.

Could she tell the House and those of us who are concerned about Medicare, especially in regard to what is happening in Provinces like Alberta, whether she intends to address the problems of premiums through the Canada Health Act, which we hope to see very soon, and the way in which payment for health care through the premium mechanism in Alberta leads to the erosion of universality? In Alberta especially it is not just the erosion of universality, it is the complete destruction of universality. Does she have any plans to address that, or does she still maintain the position that she must keep a hands-off position in this matter?

Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Madam Speaker, as I stated yesterday in answer to some media queries, Alberta would not be in such an administrative mess if it had taken the route of having people pay for Medicare through general taxes, which is also the best method in terms of social justice. It would hit everyone equally, and all of those who are not technically on welfare but are unemployed, and who certainly are not rich by any standard, would not be caught between a two-chair situation as we see now.

However, the Member should not polarize, asking to be in favour of premiums or not, and equating it with not being able to do anything. According to Justice experts, under the Constitution we cannot, ourselves, decide that premiums are not proper for Provinces to choose if that is what they wish. But we will have a paragraph on universality, like we already have, that is as strong as possible according to the Constitution. If there is a breach of universality because premiums are not paid, that will be a breach of the Medicare Act.

Mr. Blaikie: We do not need any lectures from the Minister on social justice. The NDP pioneered the abolition of premiums in all the Provinces where it governed.

Mr. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg-Birds Hill): Does the Minister intend to find a way, through the new Act, to take action in a situation where the payment of premiums in a certain way is found to be an erosion of universality? It is not enough for her just to declare that she does not like them. Does she have any mechanism in mind for taking action when we find that premiums are eroding universality?

Furthermore, will we see the new Canada Health Act very soon? It has been three weeks since I asked her about that when we first came back, and we still hear nothing but rhetoric from the Minister.

Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare): If the NDP is so much in favour of Medicare, and since Medicare needs all the friends it can have, maybe it would help if the Minister from Manitoba would say it a few times publicly. I would love to hear that he is supporting Medicare like he should, and like he tells me privately.

Second, my English must be getting worse by the day or week because I just said that people in Canada everywhere must have universal coverage and access to all insurance services. That means all visits to the doctors and hospitals. That is part of the Canada Health Act.

This means that whatever means Provinces use to raise additional money, such as by premiums in three of them, if they do not cover their people according to the Act it will be a breach of the Act and will, unfortunately, be subject to a penalty.

Mr. Blaikie: The Minister of Health in Manitoba has made it clear many times, as he did this summer when he met with all New Democrats across the country, that he agrees with the position we have been taking in this House and is in favour of steps to do away with the erosion of Medicare. The Minister is completely off base when she makes a charge like that.

FEDERAL FUNDING

Mr. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg-Birds Hill): Madam Speaker, does the Minister in fact intend to bring in the Canada Health Act and finally do something about those things she says she has deplored all of these years? If so, at the same time will she re-open the question of the adequacy of federal funding of Medicare and the fiscal arrangements pertaining thereto, so that when she does so it can be a more viable political option which will no longer give the Progressive Conservative provinces something to hang their ideological agenda on for the destruction of Medicare?

Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare): After the Member opposite met with the Minister in their kitchen in Manitoba, there was the Halifax meeting on September 7. You met in August, and I would have been pleased if the Minister did not forget to tell the Press that he was in favour of Medicare and not against it. That was September. There still is October and there will be November.