

Adjournment Debate

I see now that two years ago when block funding for health care was instituted, the well-intentioned gamble has backfired.

At the same conference she went on to say:

Notice should be given of the commutation of block funding and the renegotiation of cost-sharing arrangements with the provinces. The federal government must re-establish control of the medicare program. That is the official policy of the Liberal Party of Canada.

She went on to say in Winnipeg, during the campaign, on January 21, 1980:

The federal government has the right to stop medicare financing if residents are not getting reasonable care when they need it.

She also said:

Opting out is a threat to universal accessibility when doctors "balance" or "extra bill" their patients.

These are all things that have come about in provinces which are putting the lid on health care. We have had all kinds of labour strife with health care workers, doctors and nurses in the richest parts of this country, and that is why I want the minister to remember it was a Liberal bill, this Established Programs Financing Act. It was designed by the Liberal government to put a cap on federal spiralling medicare costs. She should not wait for the Hall report, but let the provinces know that the way they are proceeding is completely unacceptable to the basic principles of medicare.

Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, it is with regret that I have noted the action of the British Columbia government in increasing user charges under its hospital insurance plan and in increasing the premiums charged for coverage under its medical care insurance plan. What is most disturbing is that such increases and charges are not in the spirit or faith of medicare, which is free, good quality services to people wherever they live in Canada, in whatever province, and regardless of their income.

At the outset let me say that while I personally dislike very much these types of charges and the increases which are to commence on July 1, 1980, and I especially dislike the premium system which unfortunately is used in British Columbia and two other provinces in Canada, because premiums represent a regressive form of taxation, I must inform hon. members that, based on the information received, there is no action that the federal government can take immediately, such as withholding payment, and I will explain why.

Withholding payments can be done. It is the only tool provided in the legislation, a tool for the control of the use of the funds, but it can only be done based on the evidence that one or more of the five conditions is violated—the five principles on which medicare is based. I suppose it is fair to say that these principles or conditions are extremely general concepts and we are now faced with the problem in many provinces, unfortunately, where actions in the last two years, often in the last year and a half—unfortunately that is the case in British Columbia right now—may be breaching this concept, but withholding payment would cause a disruption of service to the people.

The previous government did appoint Mr. Justice Hall to make an inquiry which he will be completing, with recommendations, in a few weeks' time. There will just be the problem of translation left to finalize the inquiry and the publication of the report, and then I think it will be very urgent for all of us to make a great effort to save medicare, which I am sure we will do.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourn until tomorrow morning at 11 a.m.

Motion agreed to and the House adjourned at 10.30 p.m.