

# Waiting for N.P. Romanow Aug. 3, 2001

The answer is short and simple. It's spelled M-A-R-K-E-T-S

TOM FLANAGAN

Posturing over health care has dominated the news all week. Mike Harris and the other premiers say they need more money from Ottawa. Federal ministers Stéphane Dion and Allan Rock reply that more money is not what's most urgently needed; that the premiers should do a better job of managing the health care dollars they already have; and that, if they really think they need more money, they can get it by raising provincial taxes. Both sides are right and both are wrong in this pseudo-debate.

It is self-evident that more money needs to be spent in some areas. Until recently, Calgary had only two publicly owned MRI units, and the waiting time was 200 days. Now there are five units, and the waiting time is down to 50 days. That's progress, and more money was required to achieve it.

But the more important question is this: Why does Calgary, Canada's most economically buoyant city, with a population fast approaching one million, have fewer MRIs than Fargo, North Dakota? (If you don't believe the comparison with Fargo, check the Internet with "MRI Fargo" as your search term.)

I recently met a fellow Calgarian wearing casts on both wrists. His doctor thinks he has carpal tunnel syndrome, but he has to wait six to eight months for a neural conductivity test to confirm the diagnosis. With good luck, maybe he'll recover before the diagnosis is complete.

In the absence of a functioning market in health care services, our so-called system is unable to allocate resources when and where they are needed. More money may temporarily fill a few gaping holes, but it will not fix what's wrong. Instead of bureaucratic micromanagement, we need medical markets to allocate resources, with government's role limited to guaranteeing the ability to pay for essential services.

More examples: I went to see an optometrist yesterday morning. It cost \$58, but there was no problem getting an appointment. One of my teeth has suddenly become sensitive to temperature changes. If I call my dentist and he decides to replace an old filling, it will cost me \$150 or so, but it will all be done within a week. In contrast to the timely availability of these medical services, why does it take more than half a year to get a neural conductivity exam? The answer is short and simple. It's spelled M-A-R-K-E-T-S.

Researchers, writers and think-tanks are now pointing out this obvious truth, but the system remains gridlocked while Roy Romanow's commission carries out its mandate. If it were a play, we'd call it *Waiting*

*for Romanow*. But it's not a play, it's real life, and every day Canadians are dying or suffering unnecessary pain because they can't get medically indicated treatments in a timely fashion.

Nothing will happen until a political party screws up its courage, seizes the issue, and starts to put pressure on the government. Canadian Alliance, come on down! You successfully played this role with tax cuts, as the Reform party did earlier with balancing the budget and resisting separatism in Quebec. But first you have to get yourself an honest and sensible health care policy.

Current policy goes back to the mid-1990s, when Preston Manning started to attack Jean Chrétien as the "Dr. Kevorkian of health care." Basically the policy is that the federal government should put up more money while simultaneously relaxing the Canada Health Act's restraints on how the provinces spend the money. But that's not on target, because the important question is not which level of government should decide how to spend the money, it's how to introduce market principles into a government-dominated system.

The Alliance is a market-oriented party. As shown in the last federal election, voters won't believe the Alliance if it endorses socialist medicine while claiming to be pro-market on all other issues. Voters will suspect a hidden agenda, and they will be right. Most Alliance members would in fact like to move towards market medicine, but they've been cowed into trying to conceal it. They

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would do better to have the courage of their convictions.

The Alliance is holding a policy forum on health care in Ottawa Sept. 14 and 15. The right speakers have been invited: Michael Bliss, the noted historian of medicine; Michael Walker from the Fraser Institute; Bill Robson from C.D. Howe; and Diane Ablonczy, the Alliance health critic who has returned from a long trip studying how the European nations integrate market principles into their health care systems.

As a conservative, I'm never optimistic, but I'm always hopeful. Maybe a political party will finally start to talk sense about health care. Admittedly, there's some risk involved; but when you're at 10% in the polls, does it really matter?

At its best, the Reform Party took big risks and succeeded in driving the national political agenda. It's time to return to that tradition. "Waiting for Romanow" isn't good enough.

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*Tom Flanagan is professor of political science at the University of Calgary. He was research director of the Reform Party of Canada in 1991-92.*