

BUILDING on a Prescription for CHANGE

BY ANIL NAIDOO

Two years ago, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien announced that Roy Romanow would examine our publicly funded health care system and recommend action to ensure its sustainability. Over the next 18 months, Canadians from across the country reflected on this issue and articulated their vision for an expanded and more vital public health care system.

Thousands of Canadians, including many Council members, engaged in the consultation process of the Romanow Commission. At the same time, Maude Barlow travelled from coast to coast and spoke passionately at dozens of public meetings. She advocated progressive reform, decried profit and privatization, and celebrated the equality and justice of our universal system. Across the country the message to the Commission was loud and clear: Canadians would not stand for two-tiered, for-profit, private health care. Profit was not the cure!

Then, on a crisp November morning last year, the Romanow Commission delivered its 47 recommendations in a report called *Building on Values*. We welcomed Romanow's assertion that there is no evidence to support an increase in the private, for-profit delivery of health care. Romanow proposed more funding, but with accountability and an expansion of *public* health care. Polls showed that Canadians overwhelmingly supported his recommendations. Then

we waited for our politicians to listen and act accordingly.

Behind the scenes the bureaucrats shuffled back and forth. The health ministers held meetings. The federal government came out with a draft proposal. The premiers met and countered with their own proposal. Still we waited for them to listen to the will of Canadians.

Then they announced that a First Ministers' meeting on health care would be held in early February in Ottawa. Our premiers arrived at 24 Sussex Drive, the Prime Minister's residence, in motorcades. On that night, in bitterly cold weather, we stood outside and waited for our elected representatives to do the right thing.

The next day they met at the old Ottawa City Hall. Outside, we held a rally and spoke of our hope for a public health care system that we

could pass on to our children. Inside, hundreds of reporters and a small band of activists waited.

Finally, late in the evening, the Prime Minister emerged to announce a deal. We listened in anticipation. He spoke of billions more in funding and of home care and pharmacare. The words sounded good. Then we listened some more. What we didn't hear was the real problem. There would be no expansion of the Canada Health Act for the new programs. There would be no control on the skyrocketing prices of drugs. And there was no mention, let alone curtailment, of increased privatization and profit in our cherished health care system.

The time for waiting was over. Three days later, more than 1,000 concerned citizens and health care activists from across the country met at the Prescription for Change



More than 1,000 people attended workshops and plenary sessions at the three day Prescription for Change conference.

conference in Ottawa, which was co-sponsored by The Council of Canadians. Over the next two days they developed an action plan designed to protect public health care in Canada. They said the first ministers had missed a real opportunity to stop the expansion of profit and privatization in our system. And now the people would do what the politicians were unwilling to do. They would not stand idly by while ideologically driven provincial governments threatened the very core of our system and bankrupted the treasury by unleashing the profit motive on our public system.

If you are to believe these politicians and the corporate media, the latest health care accord and budget has put our health care system on the road to recovery. They say that Canadians can look forward to enjoying expanded services, increased reporting, and more money in the system. The reality is, however, that these politicians have squandered an opportunity for meaningful reform. They have chosen political expediency over the will of Canadian citizens.

The question is, will the Canadian public accept the health care accord as the best we can do? Based on the thousands who gave presentations to the Romanow Commission and the thousands who came out to hear Maude Barlow speak and the many others who attended the Prescription for Change conference, we believe the answer is clear. Canadians are willing to fight to preserve and expand public health care, and will continue to do so. Roy Romanow, in his first speech after the First Ministers' accord, called on Canadians to be vigilant. Of that, he can be assured.

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Maude Barlow speaks on the dangers of privatization and profit in our public health care system.



Anil Naidoo addresses the conference during an evening of celebration for Medicare in Canada.



Shirley Douglas talks about the historical fight for public health care and the legacy of her father, Tommy Douglas.