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The Hill Times, August 17, 2009

Conservatives need to manage health care debate

Canadians more likely to trust Liberals and NDP on health care, says Nanos.

By Cynthia M nster

Canadians are increasingly starting to be concerned about health care again as their top priority, thanks to the economy getting better, but it could be problematic for the Conservative Party, who are rarely strong on the issue, if they don't manage it properly, says a pollster.

"Usually, if you are a Conservative politician, healthcare is an issue to manage so that you're not vulnerable because healthcare is very rarely a strong issue for Conservative parties," said Nik Nanos, president of Nanos Research.

As Canadians become less worried about the economic downturn, healthcare is starting to pick up as an important issue, getting a boost from the healthcare debate going on in the United States. U.S. President Barack Obama's government is trying to expand health coverage to all Americans and allow for greater public-sector involvement alongside the current network of privately-run health insurance companies. He has said, however, that the American and Canadian systems have evolved differently and his plan isn't similar to the Canadian model.

The heated debate on President Obama's proposed reforms was brought closer to home when Shona Holmes, of Waterdown, Ont., participated in an ad criticizing the Canadian system. The ad was sponsored by Patients United Now, a U.S. group that opposes the reforms. According a recent Angus Reid poll, 58 per cent of Canadians saw the ad as deceiving while 68 per cent of Americans polled found it was informative. The poll was conducted online between July 28-31 among 1,010 randomly selected Canadian adults and 1,005 American adults. The margin of error for both surveys is plus or minus 3.1.

While Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.) and NDP leader Jack Layton (Toronto-Danforth, Ont.) have weighed into the debate, defending the Canadian system and admitting that Americans are looking at a different system, Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) is being criticized for not weighing in.

President Obama talked about Canada's involvement with the U.S. health reform debate when he met with Mexican President Felipe Calderon and Prime Minister Harper at the Security and Prosperity Partnership meeting last week in Guadalajara, Mexico.

"I suspect that you Canadians will continue to get dragged in by those who oppose reform, even though I've said nothing about Canadian health-care reform," said President Obama. "I don't find Canadians particularly scary, but I guess some of the opponents of reform think they make a good bogeyman."

When asked about the issue at the summit, Prime Minister Harper said: "Canadians support their own health-care system. As for the rest of this question my only answer is that this is an American debate, and the responsibility of the provinces."

NDP health critic Judy Wacylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, Man.) said the U.S. debate has "evoked the wrath of Canadians" because of the way the Canadian system was misrepresented.

"Canadians are disappointed that their own government has not come forward for one second to defend our system and to set the record straight. By letting this



misinformation out there they are doing a great disservice to our own system and it makes Canadians wonder how much commitment this government has to actually stand up for Canada's medicare system and maybe we are in greater danger of losing it than we actually thought," said Ms. Wasylycia-Leis.

"I think people are worried that if we let these kinds of misrepresentations go on and [we] don't challenge and counter them, it will have a serious impact in terms of Americans' impression of Canada and therefore an impact in terms of tourism, investment and all of the other things that we care about in terms of close relations so, it's certainly made people wonder in the midst of this huge campaign by a few corporate heads and privatized doctors that we don't have a Canadian government that's proud to stand up and say we've got a good system, maybe it needs some work but heck it's way better than the States and they should copy and emulate it."

A Nanos Research poll, which was released last week and has a margin of error of 3.1 per cent, showed that while jobs and the economy are still the top issue of concern for Canadians, at 30.3 per cent, they have been steadily dropping since the beginning of this year when the issue peaked. According to the poll, conducted by phone July 30 to Aug. 2 with 1,002 Canadians, healthcare is currently the top issue for 26.1 per cent of Canadians and has been steadily rising since the beginning of the year.

"I would expect over time that healthcare would probably surpass the economy and jobs as an issue as Canadians focus less on turbulence in the economy," said Mr. Nanos, president of Nanos Research.

He said that whether Mr. Harper talks about Canadian healthcare to Americans is not an issue of concern for Canadians but historically healthcare is an issue that Conservatives don't fare well with.

"If you're a Liberal, having an election about healthcare would probably be an advantage for you, because Canadians are more likely to trust the Liberals and the New Democrats on issues such as healthcare so I think for the federal Conservatives at this point in time, they're probably looking at healthcare as an issue that they have to manage so that they're not vulnerable on it," said Mr. Nanos. Given the current trend, this could mean that an earlier election date would be more beneficial for Conservatives, Mr. Nanos said.

"If the next election was about the economy, that would be to the Conservatives' advantage because Canadians generally feel that the Conservatives are stronger on issues such as jobs and the economy."

Conservative MP Tim Uppal (Edmonton-Sherwood Park, Alta.), a member of the House Health Committee said that "health is always a concern" for Canadians, but they also know it's still a good system. "Canadians... have it good compared to other countries and most of the time, except for the one offs, their health needs are being met," Mr. Uppal said, adding that although "certain groups are trying to create misconceptions," the government of Canada "should concentrate on Canada" and continue the work its doing.

"I think in Canada we continue to debate healthcare at a regular basis. I think healthcare has always been a strong part of any election platforms and I know we discuss it all the time and like I said it's always been an important part for Canadians as healthcare is one of their main concerns and main reasons for how they vote but overall in Canada we've got a very strong healthcare system and I think Canadians are happy with it," said Mr. Uppal.

Liberal health critic Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Ont.) said, however, that the government should be defending the Canadian system and that Canadians are rightly upset about the misrepresentations going on in the United States.

"This isn't about ideology or a technical debate, this is about a solidarity. As Canadians we decided a very long time ago that we would look after one another and that no family should lose their house or go bankrupt because their child has leukemia so this is a very straight-forward thing for most Canadians. It's just too bad that neither the health minister but particularly the Prime Minister can't be bothered to debate this," said Ms. Bennett.

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