

Editorial

The Supreme Court Ruling and the Future of Medicare

On June 8, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down a Quebec law which forbids the sale of health insurance for medical procedures covered by Medicare. The rationale provided for the decision was that Canadians have a right to prompt medical care. If this was the real reason for the decision, then the Supreme Court ruling will do nothing to guarantee this right to the vast majority of Canadians. Instead, it will further exacerbate the current situation in which the rich get immediate care while everybody else has to wait in line for months.

Although there is a popular perception that Medicare is a public health care system, this is not actually the case. Medicare is actually a system of public health care insurance, while most of Canada's health care system is in private hands. The main

publicly-owned portion of the health care system is the infrastructure of hospitals. A portion of the hospital workers are public employees, but most of the doctors and an increasing section of the support staff work in the private sector. Increasing the percentage of the system which is in private hands will not solve the crisis of Canadian health care, but will actually make it worse. In particular, the Supreme Court decision clears the path for the establishment in Canada of American-style HMOs, which are medical clinics set up by, and in the service of, private health insurance providers. To the extent that such private clinics are set up, a portion of the doctors currently working in the public medical system will be drawn off into the private system. So, while the waiting times for

See page 2: Medicare

Commentary

The Basis of Canada's Constitutional Crisis

The political crisis which has erupted over the revelations of the Gomery Inquiry has once again brought Canada's constitutional crisis to the fore. The fortunes of the Liberal Party in Quebec, the only viable federalist option, have plummeted and it is expected that the Bloc Quebecois will sweep Quebec in the next federal election which will probably be held within the next year. The unpopularity of the Quebec Liberal government and its neo-liberal policies of cutbacks to social programs is also expected to lead to the election of the Parti Quebecois (PQ) in the next Quebec provincial election. This, in turn, is likely to lead to another referendum on Quebec sovereignty.

The roots of Canada's constitutional crisis go back to 1867 and Canadian Confederation.

Confederation was pushed through in the most undemocratic manner without the support of the vast majority of the people in British North America. Despite the fact that the Quebec National Assembly was suspended at the time, the Canadian state promotes the myth that Canada was created by two "founding nations" – "English" Upper Canada and "French" Lower Canada. In reality, Canadian Confederation was an arrangement between the bourgeoisie of Upper and Lower Canada and the British bourgeoisie; there was only one founding nation, namely Britain, because no "English-Canadian" nation existed in 1867 nor does such a nation exist today. Furthermore, unlike most federal

See page 4: Constitutional Crisis

Medicare...from page 1

the wealthy will be shortened considerably, the waiting times for everyone else will actually be lengthened.

The long waiting times for medical treatment are not the result of Medicare or the inefficiencies of public medicine. Rather, they are due to a shortage of doctors, nurses and technicians. This shortage has two causes, both connected to the private nature of Canadian health care. One cause is external, namely the growing demand for doctors and other health care professionals in the United States. This shortage of health care professionals in the U.S. is siphoning off health care workers from Canada, as well as many other countries. The second cause is internal and is a consequence of the fact that the provincial doctors' associations control the admissions to medical schools. It is in the interests of doctors, the vast majority of whom are in private business, to keep the number of graduating doctors low, which, in turn, keeps doctors' incomes high. This is a simple matter of supply and demand.

Underlying both of these causes is the bourgeois ideology which is fostered both by the capitalist system in general and private health care in particular. By its very nature medicine spontaneously engenders an outlook of public service. However, this spontaneous outlook is largely negated by the capitalist striving for maximum profits which infects private health care professionals. Medicine, far more than any other of the sciences, attracts students whose motivation in life is to become wealthy and the entire system reinforces such attitudes, encouraging them to become specialists instead of family practitioners in order to make even more money, etc. As a result of this intense ideological pressure emphasizing individualism and self-advancement, a significant percentage of health care professionals see nothing wrong with abandoning their patients and their country to make more money in another country. Within the country, there are severe shortages of doctors and other professionals in the urban areas and it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep doctors in small towns and rural areas. Not only can they make far more money in the cities, but the acute shortage of doctors outside of the major urban

centres means that an onerous workload is placed on those who choose to work in these areas. In addition, the medical profession, in general, sees nothing wrong with deliberately maintaining a chronic shortage of doctors in order to keep salaries artificially high. This is how capitalism works.

In addition to the ideological pressures on health care professionals is the pressure resulting from the huge debt load borne by many graduating students, particularly doctors. This means that many new doctors must seek the highest paying jobs they can find in order to dig themselves out of debt.

Aggravating the problem of the shortage of medical professionals is the fact that the pharmaceutical industry is a highly monopolized industry which is able to hold entire countries to ransom. As a result, every increase in health care budgets is almost immediately eaten up by increases in the cost of drugs, which is the most rapidly rising cost in the Canadian health care system.

In other words, it is clear from even the most cursory examination of the Canadian health care system that the problem underlying the current crisis is not a lack of private health care. Rather, the problem is the surplus of private health care and the lack of a truly public health care system. The health care system in Cuba illustrates the truth of this. Cuba spends far less as a percentage of its spending on health care than Canada does. Yet, it not only has a world-class health care system, but has such a surplus of doctors that it has more than 20,000 doctors working in the poorest and most difficult conditions throughout Latin America and Africa. These doctors could easily "defect" to the United States where they would be welcomed with open arms and treated like kings. However, their deep commitment to public service and to the health of the people keeps them from doing so. The solution to the crisis of Canadian health care is to train medical professionals with a similarly high level of social consciousness. However, that goal cannot be achieved so long as health care is controlled by private capitalist interests. It can only be achieved by abolishing private health care entirely and establishing a genuine public health care system geared towards serving the health care needs of the Canadian people.

U.S. Fails to Impose Agenda at OAS Summit

Something unusual happened in Fort Lauderdale last week. At the Organization of American States' (OAS) General Assembly, which brought together senior ministers from the 34 OAS member states from June 5 to 7, an American proposal to reform the organization's charter was soundly rejected.

This was the first OAS General Assembly held in the U.S. in 30 years, with the Americans stressing the important initiative they would present to OAS member-states for weeks leading up to the meeting.

The U.S. draft proposal, entitled "Declaration of Florida: Delivering the Benefits of Democracy" was, according to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, necessary to strengthen democracies in the region. Short on specifics while long on descriptions of the importance of democratic elections and the free-market economy, the draft also contained a proposal for the creation of an unspecified mechanism for the "application of the Inter-American Democratic Charter". While both Rice and U.S. President Bush said this mechanism would allow the OAS to take "concrete measures" to assist "democracies in trouble", it was clear that the majority of OAS members saw it as a means for further U.S. intervention in their internal affairs. The American proposal was rejected by 28 countries and a quickly cobbled-together and slightly watered down Chilean proposal was also rejected. (Canada accepted the U.S. proposal in principle but also helped draft the Chilean counter-proposal). The countries which opposed the proposal stated quite clearly that the document was too interventionist and threatened the sovereignty of member states.

The rejection of the proposal was unusual because the establishment of the OAS was led by the Americans in 1948 primarily as means to ensure their dominance in the Americas. To date that is the role the organization has played. The U.S. also established the OAS as a means to crush strong revolutionary movements within many of the countries of the Americas, and through the organization has provided tacit approval to over a dozen military and fascist dictatorships.

While the OAS founding charter officially enshrines principles of democracy and non-intervention, members have always understood that

both these principles were subject to U.S. approval. So, for example, members allowed the U.S. to have Cuba ejected from the OAS following the success of the Cuban revolution for the so-called anti-democratic nature of the Cuban people's revolutionary government. For decades afterwards, the OAS turned a blind eye as the U.S. government tried repeatedly to overthrow the Cuban government or assassinate Fidel Castro, while welcoming the likes of Pinochet, Noriega, Somoza, Batista and others to address meetings of the OAS General Assembly.

For 57 years, the organization has served as a virtual rubber stamp for U.S. imperialist foreign policy, a rubber stamp which the U.S. so takes for granted that it has not even seen the need to host a General Assembly meeting since 1974.

Bush, apparently without irony, noted in his speech to the Assembly that in 1974, fewer than half the OAS members had democratically elected governments - without exception, these dictatorships were backed financially and militarily by the U.S.

"The dramatic gains for democracy we have witnessed in our hemisphere must not be taken for granted," Bush said, urging OAS members to accept the American proposal. "In the new Americas of the 21st century, bringing a better life to our people requires choosing between two competing visions. One offers a vision of hope. It is founded on representative government, integration into the world markets, and a faith in the transformative power of freedom in individual lives."

In an apparent reference to progressive governments elected in Venezuela, Argentina and Uruguay, Bush said that the other vision "seeks to roll back the democratic progress of the past two decades by playing to fear, pitting neighbour against neighbour and blaming others for their own failures to provide for their people."

Bush and Rice were visibly shocked, both by the rejection of the U.S. proposal and the open way in which OAS representatives condemned it.

Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said that "cooperation and dialogue, rather than interventionist mechanisms, should be the key concepts," governing

See page 4: OAS Summit

Constitutional Crisis...from page 1

states that were created in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the case of Canada one of the “founding nations” – Quebec – did not possess a veto on any question and there was no provision for the voluntary withdrawal of Quebec from this federal arrangement. In other words, Canadian Confederation was not the voluntary union of equals, but a colonial arrangement in which Quebec was subservient to Upper Canada. However, for self-serving reasons the Canadian state and several generations of scholars continue to promote the myth of “two founding nations”.

The current constitutional crisis was initiated by the rise of “separatism” in Quebec during the 1960s and 1970s. The government of Lester Pearson responded with a new flag and the policy of bilingualism and biculturalism, while the Trudeau government began a systematic campaign to deny the very existence of the nation of Quebec. A number of administrative measures were taken, beginning with the 1971 Victoria Conference of First Ministers and escalating with the election of the Parti Quebecois in 1976, which reduced Quebec to the status of a province just like all of the other provinces. This fundamentally changed the status of one of the “founding nations” without even asking that nation for its approval. The repatriation of the constitution in 1982 and the drafting of an amending formula, both without the consent of Quebec, further exacerbated this problem. In other words, the Canadian state unilaterally altered the arrangement with the nation of Quebec, rendering the Canadian Constitution a dead letter.

The problem facing the Canadian political and economic elites is that the nation of Quebec exists as an objective historical reality. The constitutional crisis which has gripped Canada since at least the 1960s has not been caused by the demand of the Quebecois that their nation be recognized by the rest of Canada. The nation of Quebec has a right to self-determination just like every other nation. The crisis has been created by the refusal of the Canadian bourgeoisie to recognize either the existence of the nation of Quebec or its right to self-determination. This crisis cannot be overcome except by recognizing historical realities and establishing a new relationship between Canada and the nation of Quebec, as well as the various Aboriginal nations, a relationship based on equality, fraternity and mutual respect.

OAS Summit...from page 1

any application of the Democratic Charter in OAS member-states, while a spokesperson for Mexican President Vicente Fox told reporters “When it comes to democracy, in principle we are not in agreement with any tutelage from anybody.”

Venezuela’s Foreign Minister Alí Rodríguez said the founding charter of the OAS is “extremely clear with respect to non-intervention in the internal affairs of member-states, the right to elect governments without external interference.” The American proposal, he said, was an attempt by the Americans to justify their attempts to overthrow the democratically elected Chavez government in Venezuela. “The OAS does not have the power to evaluate the state of democracy in the region’s countries,” Rodríguez said, adding “democracy can thrive in many ways as long as those forms honour universal principles such as freedom of speech and respect for human rights.”

There was also strong opposition to the American proposal from the CARICOM countries, who pointed to the U.S. removal of the elected Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide as an example of the kind of ‘democratic intervention’ they felt the American proposal would endorse. Discussions on the American proposal concluded with a resolution for CARICOM members, working with representatives from Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil and Surinam, to draft an alternative proposal on strengthening democracy in the Americas for presentation to the next OAS General Assembly.

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