

Election wrap: medical profession sparsely represented in House of Commons

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If economics truly is “the dismal science,” then Canadians might well be tempted to conclude that politics is the dismal art.

As they trekked to the polls on Oct. 14 to make their choices in the 40th general election, pollsters warned that all those voters seemed singularly unimpressed with their options — party leaders were largely uninspirational; campaigns lacklustre and strategies mediocre, if not incoherent. All parties seemed resolutely determined to avoid issues like health care. In fact, it barely made a ripple in the political pond throughout the 5-week campaign despite being consistently rated as a major public concern.

Small wonder, then, that many eligible voters did not make the trek, resulting in a historic low turnout of 59%, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the governing Conservatives garnered 143 seats and earned their second consecutive minority. The Liberals plummeted to 76. The Bloc Québécois held at 50, while the New Democrats rose to 37. The Green Party was shut out, while 2 independents were elected.

Within that mix lies another harsh reality: the medical community will continue to be sparsely represented within Parliament.

There were 4 physicians in the House of Commons when it was dissolved. There will be 4 in the new Parliament, in fact, the same 4 stalwarts as in the previous one. All are Liberals and all are general practitioners:

- Dr. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul’s)
- Dr. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre)
- Dr. Keith Martin (Esquimalt Juan De Fuca)
- Dr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds Dollard).

It will be Bennett’s fifth term in the House, while Martin, Fry and Patry have now successfully run 6 times.

Eleven other physicians who sought office saw their political aspirations scuttled:



Reuters /Blair Gable

Re-elected Prime Minister Stephen Harper arrives at the Canada Reception Centre in Ottawa, Ontario, a day after his Conservatives captured their second consecutive minority.

- Dr. Pierre Gfeller, general practitioner, Liberal (Laurentides-Labelle)
 - Dr. Qais Ghanem, neurophysiologist, Green Party (Ottawa South)
 - Dr. Sean Godfrey, pediatrician, Liberal (Oshawa)
 - Dr. Gordon Guyatt, professor, McMaster University Department of Clinical Epidemiology & Biostatistics, New Democrat (Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Westdale)
 - Dr. Eric Hoskins, general medicine/epidemiology, War Child Canada president, youngest ever recipient of United Nations Association in Canada’s Lester B. Pearson Peace medal, Liberal (Haldimand-Norfolk)
 - Dr. Benson Lau, family physician, Conservative (Scarborough Agincourt)
 - Dr. Robert O’Connor, family physician, Green Party (Bonavista-Gander-Grand Falls-Windsor)
 - Dr. André Sylvestre, family physician, Green Party (Pontiac)
 - Dr. Lionel Traverse, pediatrician, Liberal (Abbotsford)
 - Dr. Georgina Wilcock, chief of the Scarborough Hospital Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Green Party (Don Valley West)
 - Dr. Martha Jo Willard, pathologist, Liberal (Brandon-Souris)
- Faring even less favorably than physicians was the nursing profession. Of 22 candidates with a nursing background, just one, Conservative Cathy McLeod (Kamloops-Thompson-Cariboo), the former mayor of Pemberton, British Columbia, prevailed.
- As professions, physicians and nurses will lag well behind lawyers (50) in Parliamentary representation. They also trailed political aides (32), teachers (17), farmers (16), journalists (7) and restaurateurs (5). But they matched policeman (4) and chiropractors (4).
- The 4 chiropractors all served in the past Parliament:
- Colin Carrie, Conservative (Oshawa)
 - Ruby Dhalla, Liberal (Brampton-Springdale)
 - Gary Goodyear, Conservative (Cambridge)
 - James Lunney, Conservative (Nanaimo-Alberni)
- Dentist, Christian missionary and Conservative Harold Albrecht (Kitchener-Conestoga) was the only other health professional elected to Parliament.

But several other Members of Parliament do have at least a measure of experience in dealing with health issues. Re-elected were: Conservative Diane Finley (Haldimand-Norfolk), who helped establish the private ambulance services company Canadian Medical Response; New Democrat Peter Julian (Burnaby-New Westminster), executive director of the Western Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing; New Democrat Brian Masse (Windsor West), a long-time activist for the disabled; and Bloc Quebecois Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint Maurice-Champlain), former psychomotor rehabilitation specialist at the Trois-Rivières Regional General Hospital.

Among newcomers to the House with a measure of health-related experience are: Liberal Kirsty Duncan (Etobi-

coke North), associate professor of health studies at the University of Toronto; as well as New Democrat Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury), a former manager of residential programs for the handicapped.

Almost as sparse as health profession representation in the House of Commons were actual health policy commitments made on the hustings, particularly from Harper's Conservatives, who essentially took no stance on 10 health issues during a CMAJ election survey (*CMAJ* 2008;179[8]:757-8).

Among the few commitments made by the Conservatives were modest measures to address the shortage of doctors and nurses, including:

- \$10 million per year over 4 years to fund 50 new residency spots in teaching hospitals

- \$5 million fund to attract Canadian physicians practicing abroad to return to Canada. The Conservatives projected the fund would result in the repatriation of 300 physicians over 4 years
- \$5 million/3 years to “develop recruitment and retention strategies for the nursing profession.”

Other Conservative commitments were extremely broad in nature. Harper's platform promises to “continue to take creative measures to tackle major lung, heart and neurological diseases.” The new government also vows to end discriminatory life insurance practice and crackdown on tobacco advertising in print and electronic media reach by children. — Wayne Kondro, *CMAJ*

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