

Calgary MD waged surprisingly strong election campaign against Alberta premier

Richard Cairney

In brief

CONCERN ABOUT THE IMPACT THE PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT has had on health care in Alberta prompted Calgary physician Harold Swanson to challenge Premier Ralph Klein not once but twice in the recent provincial election campaign. Unable to wrest the PC nomination from the premier, he switched to the Liberal party to challenge Klein at the polls. Swanson, who lost to the premier but still did surprisingly well in the election, predicts Alberta will move toward two-tier medicine.

En bref

LES PRÉOCCUPATIONS SOULEVÉES PAR CE QUE LE GOUVERNEMENT PROGRESSISTE-CONSERVATEUR a fait aux soins de santé en Alberta ont poussé le D^r Harold Swanson, médecin de Calgary, à se présenter contre le premier ministre Ralph Klein non pas une mais deux fois au cours de la récente campagne électorale provinciale. Incapable de déloger le premier ministre comme candidat progressiste-conservateur, le D^r Swanson est passé au Parti libéral pour se mesurer au premier ministre Klein au bureau de vote : il lui a toutefois manqué 3000 voix. Même si il est heureux de ces résultats, le médecin prévoit que l'Alberta se rapprochera encore davantage de la médecine à deux paliers et créera d'autres problèmes pour la prestation des soins de santé.

No one in Alberta doubted the outcome of the province's March election. Opinion polls had indicated an easy sweep for Premier Ralph Klein's Progressive Conservatives, whose hard-line spending cuts have put the province in remarkable financial shape — even if health care services have been gutted in the process. Albertans have faced more than \$500 million in spending cuts in the past 3 years.

With the election's outcome a foregone conclusion, the focus switched to individual ridings. One of the most closely watched contests was in Klein's own riding of Calgary-Elbow, where the premier faced off against Dr. Harold Swanson. Swanson, a longtime Conservative angered by the Tories' health care cuts, first dropped the gauntlet last October when he challenged Klein for the Tory nomination in the riding. Even though Klein's most loyal supporters rewarded Swanson with high-decibel cheers and a standing ovation, they voted for the premier.

After mulling things over, Swanson decided that the Tories had changed and the best way to fight back that was to join the Liberals and run against the premier on his own turf. Reaction was mixed. Although voters in the well-manicured riding seemed pleased that someone would take on the enormously popular premier, Klein won by 3000 votes. Still, Swanson made a remarkable showing. In a province that was swept by the Tories — they took 76% of the province's 83 seats — he managed to stay within sight of Klein and outpaced the third-place finisher by almost 5000 votes.

Now that the election is over, the Calgary radiologist is awaiting more health care turbulence. "[Klein's] goal really is to have two-tier medicine and two-tier education," he warns. "To me, [privatization] will be the biggest hidden income tax [increase] ever. If you know anything about HMOs [health maintenance orga-



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Dave Chidley photo

**Dr. Harold Swanson faces the media on election day in Alberta**

nizations] and private health and private education in the United States, [you know] they are very expensive,” says Swanson, a clinical associate professor of radiology and neuroscience at the University of Calgary.

Critics of the Klein government say that when the province agreed to pay facility fees to private clinics last year, it opened the door to a two-tier system. A year later, a private firm is renovating Calgary’s Grace Hospital, which had been shut down by the Calgary Regional Health Authority, in order to land contract work with the province’s Workers’ Compensation Board.

Swanson, who belongs to a committee that is fighting to keep Calgary’s General Hospital up and running, sees other ominous signs of trouble for public health care, even if many people say things are now on the upswing.

Swanson suspects that several recent moves — the decision to “re-invest” \$475 million in health care by the turn of the century, a contract settlement with the province’s nurses and the removal of a cap on physicians’ fees — were all implemented as election strategies.

Removing the cap on doctors’ fees could add \$50 million to the province’s health budget, and Swanson feels

the move was simply an attempt to buy doctors’ loyalty. “That had been agreed to back in February, long before the election, but they didn’t [announce it] until after the election was called.” Swanson thinks many doctors refused to confront politicians during the campaign “because they feel threatened by the current system,” but he wasn’t afraid to speak out.

Not only did he become a valuable tool in the Liberals’ campaign — he was showcased across the province in the Liberals’ radio commercials — he also learned a few tricks from Klein’s campaign team. The Conservatives’ election machine was both fascinating and intimidating, he says.

But it is a sign of Ralph Klein’s popularity that even without their well-oiled election machinery the Conservatives would likely have won by a large margin. How could this happen, with health care having faced so many cuts? Why would Albertans re-elect Klein with such a massive majority?

During the election, an interviewer asked Swanson if he thought voters were stupid. “I said, ‘Well, those are your words, not mine.’ But a lot of people out there don’t take the time to look into the issues. They have been Conservatives for a long time, like I was, and they think the Conservative policy is what it always has been.”

Provincially, the campaign strategy employed by many Tory candidates appeared to consist of saying as little as possible and letting Klein win the election. When the dust settled the Liberals had lost 11 seats, settling for 18, and the New Democrats, which had no members sitting prior to the election, had taken 2 ridings. The Conservatives ended up with 9 more members than before the election, and now control 63 seats in the 83-seat legislature.

Swanson says the election boiled down to a single word: “Ralph.”

When he went door to door in the riding, says Swanson, he heard the same mantra: “Ralph kept his promise. Ralph’s going to stay the course.”

“Somehow,” Swanson concludes, “we didn’t get our message across.” ?