

CMAJ 2011 election survey: public health

The aspirations of political parties are of no concern to deadly viruses and foodborne pathogens. A public health crisis can arise at any time, including during election campaigns, regardless of how much damage it may do to a government's chances of remaining in power.

To ensure that political goals don't trump public health concerns, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) should be able to independently communicate with both Parliament and the public, according to some health experts. Currently, however, the agency is granted no such freedom.

PHAC was formed in 2004, partially in response to the 2003 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and its primary goal is to "strengthen Canada's capacity to protect and improve the health of Canadians and to help reduce pressures on the health-care system" (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/about_apropos/who-eng.php). The agency reports to the Ministry of Health. Its top official, the chief public health officer of Canada, serves at the pleasure of the federal minister of health and thus can be dismissed at any time.

In 2008, a deadly listeriosis outbreak linked to tainted meat occurred shortly before a federal election. The most visible figures during that crisis were not public health officials but rather people from the food industry or the Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, according to observers who suggested that messages "concerning the competence of government oversight and the effectiveness of its policies with respect to preserving the health security of its population could be influential on the decisions of the electorate. This raises the question of the degree of independence of the chief public health officer, especially during specific points in the political cycle" (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.081441).

Despite such concerns, no federal party appears committed to granting PHAC complete autonomy, according



Public Health Agency of Canada

Chief Public Health Officer of Canada Dr. David Butler-Jones has deliberately chosen descriptive rather than prescriptive approaches in his annual public health reports.

to party responses to CMAJ's 2011 election survey.

The New Democratic Party said it had no official policy on turning PHAC into an independent agency, but would consider doing so if an analysis indicated it would benefit public health and was "workable within the current fiscal situation."

The Bloc Québécois also said it would consider this option if an independent PHAC fostered transparency, efficiency and respect for Quebec.

Likewise, the Liberal Party offered no official stance on granting autonomy to PHAC, though claiming it takes public health "very seriously" and "expects advice and information coming from the Public Health Agency of Canada to be independent and non-partisan."

The Conservatives, meanwhile, declined to participate in the CMAJ survey. The party said all policy questions can be answered by perusing its platform. A search for the phrases "PHAC" and "public health agency" within the platform yielded no matches. — Roger Collier, CMAJ

Survey question: Should the Public Health Agency of Canada be made an independent agency reporting directly to Parliament?

Conservative response:

No response. Rather than participate in CMAJ's 2011 election survey, the Conservatives forwarded a weblink to their party platform. Asked what the rationale was for declining participation, party spokesperson Ryan Sparrow says the weblink constitutes a response to the survey. "That response is the response from the campaign."

Liberal response:

"The Liberal Party takes issues of public health very seriously and expects advice and information coming from the Public Health Agency of Canada to be independent and non-partisan.

A Liberal government will take significant actions to improve public health. We will implement a new Canadian Health Promotion Strategy. We will support sport and active living and improve education and promotion of healthy foods. We will work with the Council of Ministers for Education in Canada towards setting national targets for physical activity in primary and secondary schools.

A Liberal government will call on Canada's elite athletes to serve as models for young Canadians. And to ensure that the next generation of Olympians is there to inspire youth across Canada, a Liberal government would commit to stable and sustained funding for Own the Podium and Sport Canada.

At the heart of this commitment to a safer, healthier country is Canada's first National Food Policy, a comprehensive set of measures designed to fulfill the simple, yet powerful goal of putting more healthy Canadian food on Canadian plates. Measures include:

- A new Healthy Choices program to educate Canadians on healthy eating, how the food system works, and how to minimize threats to food safety.

- New, progressive labeling regulations that give clear and simple information to Canadians on the nutritional value of the foods they purchase, improve the regulatory process for new health claims, and clarify Product of Canada labeling.
- Strong new regulatory standards on trans fats and salt.
- \$40 million over four years to implement a new Healthy Start program to help 250,000 children from low-income families access healthy, home-grown foods, in partnership with the provinces, territories and non-governmental organizations. A Liberal government will also commit to ongoing support for the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP) and Aboriginal Head Start Program (AHSP).
- \$80 million over four years to create a Buy Local Fund. The Fund will promote high-quality, homegrown foods produced by local farmers and support a Farmers' Markets Development Program to market and grow Canada's farmers' markets, in cooperation with the provinces and territories."

New Democrat response:

"The Public Health Agency of Canada plays a vital role in protecting the health of Canadians. While New Democrats do not have a policy on turning it into an independent agency we would be willing to consider such a proposal provided upon analysis such action improves the health protection of Canadians and is workable within the current fiscal situation."

Bloc Québécois response:

"Le Québec a déjà son propre organisme de santé publique depuis 1998, l'Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ), et il s'est donné un

vaste appareil de santé publique à l'échelle régionale et locale. Puisque c'est le gouvernement du Québec qui possède l'expertise et qui peut intervenir auprès de tous les établissements du réseau québécois de santé, c'est à lui seul que revient la décision d'établir les priorités et de développer des plans d'action.

Ceci dit, si cette mesure peut favoriser la transparence, l'efficacité et le respect des juridictions québécoises, le Bloc Québécois est prêt à considérer cette option."

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Editor's note: Eighth of a series of stories on *CMAJ*'s 2011 election survey:

Part 1: Health transfers (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3865)

Part 2: Pharmacare (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3870)

Part 3: Health human resources (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3875)

Part 4: Home/palliative care (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3876)

Part 5: Research (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3877)

Part 6: Food safety (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3878)

Part 7: Transparency (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3879)