

Health care's reluctant reformers

Back in his opposition days, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty could not find enough negative words to say about private sector involvement in the public health care system, particularly when it came to public-private partnerships (P3s). "I'm calling on (former premier Ernie) Eves to halt any contract signings when it comes to P3s in the province of Ontario," Mr. McGuinty said during the 2003 provincial election campaign. "I stand against the Americanization of our hospitals."

Mr. McGuinty's Liberals were equally unequivocal in their campaign platform. "The Harris-Eves government is opening the way to private MRI and CT clinics and private hospitals," they proclaimed. "As the Romanow Commission proved, privatization is a step backward ... We will end the Harris-Eves agenda of creeping privatization."

Less than two years later, Mr. McGuinty is singing a different tune. Gone is the rhetoric about the evils of any deviation from a government health care monopoly. Instead, Ontario is seeing more P3s announced - the latest a planned 289-bed hospital in Sault Ste. Marie - and P3s in Brampton and Ottawa that the Premier previously railed against are moving forward with only minor changes. Meanwhile, his government is turning a blind eye as private health clinics sprout up in the province - including the Provis Infusion Clinic, a new facility charging up to \$70,000 for cancer treatments approved by Ottawa, but not covered by provincial government.

Unsurprisingly, critics from both sides of the spectrum are up in arms over the Liberals' hypocrisy. "They cried Chicken Little when the Conservatives brought in the P3 hospitals in Brampton and Ottawa,"

Conservative MPP John Baird complained this week. "The very policies they vilified are now the law of the land." Provincial NDP leader Howard Hampton, meanwhile, has accused the Liberals of "privatizing through the back door." But while there's no question that Mr. McGuinty misled voters on in the last campaign, that's not to say his about-face shouldn't be celebrated all the same.

If they had their way, the Liberals would no doubt prefer to continue opposing private sector medicare involvement in all its forms. With that in mind, their increasing willingness to allow flexibility within the system is proof that the reality of the public monopoly's unsustainability is finally being recognized even by those who've long denied it.

Obviously, there is a long way between a few P3 hospitals and private clinics and giving the system the infusion of competition and consumer choice that it needs. But if it continues to open the door to a greater role for the private sector, Mr. McGuinty's government has the opportunity to join Quebec in leading the way nationally. The federal Liberals won't be keen to try to bully Canada's biggest province, where most of their MPs hail from, in the way they have other provinces. And the generally centre-left Mr. McGuinty will be tough for defenders of medicare's status quo to paint as a heartless proponent of "Americanizing" medicare, in the way they have with Mr. Harris, Ralph Klein and others. The question is whether Mr. McGuinty has the fortitude to go beyond what for the time being remains relatively minor tinkering.