

Politics

By Jim-Beau Lieyeah

WHAT DOES \$23.4 BILLION BUY?

It buys an old magic trick, all of Canadas premiers, and some credibility for an embattled Prime Minister. There is considerable concern, in our great country, about the state of our health care system. All governments had to cut into this expenditure-heavy area when they were pressed to balance budgets. Lag times in implementation have created the porous system available today. But all that changed on Sept. 11th.

Santa Chretien came to town hauling a sled full of money bags. Three months into the fiscal year and his government was sitting on a \$12 billion surplus (unbeknownst to the public and the Premiers, at the time). Like Robin Hood riding into Nottingham, he was ready to spread it around. That kind of money is sure to buy some popularity.

Now the magic trick Chretien pulled is better known as, "pulling the rug out from under someone". He must have planned this months ago. Our wise PM and his staff have the power to set by-election dates. But a First Ministers Conference (a meeting that includes all Premiers and the Prime Minister), required to cut a health care deal, needs to be planned months in advance, to ensure all attend. But by-elections take far less time, say six weeks, more or less, to arrange.

What better day to have a by-election than Sept. 11th? Not just any by-elections either but for freshly crowned Alliance Leader Stockwell Day and a two timer Tory Leader named Joe Clark. So what should have been a horde of coverage for them

on by-election day was drastically reduced for 23 billion reasons.

Those same reasons also buy 10 Premiers under a different type of name called "cooperative federalism." Each province has a different set of priorities but this type of big money (almost 8 times the total of all goods and services produced in P.E.I., in one year) is hard to turn down.

Premier Pat Binns wanted to link the talks to the cap on equalization payments. This is tax money taken from the have provinces, Ontario, Alberta, and BC; and given to the have nots, which are all the rest. But Binns and other Maritimes Premiers were persuaded to save this for another day.

Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard and Ontario Premier Mike Harris were concerned about the language, that they felt was intrusive, in a draft document. Their power politick thinking was sound in that no deal could possibly be signed without Canadas two most populous provinces on board. But most Premiers, aware of the money involved and knowing Ottawas resolve to spend it, were clear in expressing their displeasure to these hold outs. Some even threatened to campaign against Harris. The irony of all this is that Bouchard needed Harris to force Chretien's hand. But when Harris got cold feet about his gun to the head style negotiation tactics, he called his old friend Quebec Provincial Liberal leader Jean Charest for advice. The man, who Bouchard called "a Harris clone" during the last provincial election, told Mike to stick to his guns. They did and it forced Ottawa to blink in two ways.

The first blink occurred in

the language used around the management of health care. The draft had contained references to this jurisdiction using the terminology First Ministers. This was changed to Premiers to ensure that their would be no federal management in health care. This was reinforced in the preamble of the document, which asserts that the accord does not change the existing power structure.

The second blink was in accountability through a public report card. Ottawa had wanted one organization to report or audit on how health care money got spent. The provinces wanted to use their own accounting practices in evaluating how the money got spent. This was an easy horse trade for Chretien and voila, \$23 billion later and an historic accord was reached with provinces getting more money for health.

So what does this do to Chretiens credibility? He can boast about how federalism is working for Canadians. He can claim that he is listening to his population in reaching a health care accord that puts more money into most people's number one concern. He can assert that he is the best person to lead the central government in negotiating with Premiers. He can do all this and most importantly of all, claim that his government continues to stay out of the face of Canadians and provide good, scandal free government. Is it enough to buy another term? Only time will tell. But until then most Canadians should have a little more time thanks to the desperately needed dollars being pumped into health care.



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