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Martin challenges Klein to release health plan and Harper to judge it

ST. CATHARINES, Ont. (CP) _ Paul Martin has challenged Stephen Harper and the premier of Alberta to lay their cards on the table about potential changes to medicare before the federal election.

The Liberal leader resumed his attack Friday on Alberta Premier Ralph Klein and the Conservative leader, whom he has called ``silent partners" in a plot to strip medicare.

Klein has said he will announce provincial health-care changes _ some of which could violate the Canada Health Act _ two days after the June 28 federal election.

``Let's see Premier Klein's plan. Let's see it," Martin told a Liberal-friendly crowd. ``Not two days after the election, but now before June 28. Before Canadians go to the polls."

Then voters could have a chance to see how Harper would handle medicare as prime minister before casting their ballots, Martin said.

``I would ask Stephen Harper to stand up and offer his views as I have already said that I will do . . . Canadians have a right to judge for themselves the resolve of national leaders to stand up for the principles of the Canada Health Act."

Like his Liberal rival, Harper has promised a multibillion-dollar funding boost to health care and has said he will insist that the provinces respect the five principles of the Canada Health Act.

But he has also said Ottawa has no business dictating to provinces whether they should experiment with private delivery of medical services within the public system.

``(Harper said) `Why do I care? Do these sound like the words of a prime minister?' " Martin said.

``He shrugged off the No. 1 priority of Canadians, from coast to coast to coast. Well let me tell Mr. Harper something: I believe that health care is the prime minister's job."

But Martin was forced to fend off claims of health-care hypocrisy. In the 1990s the Liberal government slashed health transfers to the provinces and failed to enforce provincial violations of the health act.

Martin said times have changed. In the '90s the government was clawing back spending to eliminate a budget deficit that threatened the long-term sustainability of programs like health care, he said.

And as for Ottawa's failure to stop the proliferation of private, for-fee clinics sprouting up across the country, Martin pointed to his Liberal platform and claimed it has the solution.

The platform proposes creating a watchdog panel of federal, provincial and independent health experts to review cases of alleged violations of the act.

If a province is found to have broken the rules of public health care, the panel will recommend that the federal government freeze a certain transfer payments until the violation is stopped.

Martin stepped up his attack on Harper and Klein in the face of yet another poll showing the Liberal and Conservatives still locked in a dead heat with 10 days to go in the campaign.

Harper accused Martin of hypocrisy on medicare. He said Martin was aware of Klein's plan to propose health-care changes long before the Liberals suddenly made it a campaign issue earlier this week.

Martin denied the charge: ``It's absolutely untrue. Absolutely untrue."

Banking on medicare as the No. 1 theme of his campaign, Martin spent part of the afternoon in a panel talk with medical experts who also are cancer patients, have suffered heart attacks and one woman currently suffering from terminal Lou Gehrig's disease.

He listened to their stories about the long wait for treatment and to their suggestions for health reform. In one poignant moment, Martin promised that he would make major improvements to medicare.

``I give you my word that at the end of my time the situation will have improved substantially," he said softly as the discussion drew to a close.

``The debate will not simply be around the fringes but we will have taken it to a point where the outcomes are measurably, measurably better."