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Klein firm on health reform

By DARCY HENTON

EDMONTON (CP) - Ralph Klein says Albertans are scared of health care reform, but he is determined to embark down that road anyway.

The Alberta premier said he is convinced the health care system needs a radical shake-up or it will collapse and that's why he plans to take another run at it. "It's politically touchy and then you get the opposition whipping up the Friends of Medicare and the Raging Grannies," he told reporters Wednesday. "You mention health care reform and people's hair lights on fire."

When asked how he plans to get around that hurdle, Klein invoked former prime minister Pierre Trudeau's famous line: "Watch me."

Klein said that Ottawa needs to put more money into the system, but that won't be enough to keep it sustainable.

"That's a small piece of the puzzle," he said. "We need to embark on an aggressive campaign of reform to achieve sustainability."

The premier didn't offer any details of the reforms his government has in mind, but he has suggested it could involve user fees and more private health care delivery.

Klein also expressed dismay that "for some reason" Alberta has been portrayed as the poster boy for health care reform.

"(Quebec Premier) Jean Charest told me what we're doing in this province is mild compared to what they are doing in Quebec, but the federal government doesn't want to pick on Quebec in terms of its public-private mix," he said.

Klein told his fellow premiers at the Council of the Federation meeting in Vancouver this week that he is prepared to fight Ottawa alone and risk losing federal health care dollars in the process.

"I told them I really don't care what you guys do. We're going to go down our own path."

He showed no concern about embarking on such a controversial path with a provincial election looming.

"I kind of like it," he said.

Klein's bid to reform the health care system to date has been a stutter with one-step forward and two-steps back. His health minister has shelved several reports that call for radically new ways to pay for health care. Klein said he's determined to put them back on the table.

"I have always said you can head down any road . . . and if you see a roadblock you always leave yourself room to back up and find another route, as long as you arrive at the destination."

His government used that strategy to introduce controversial Bill 11 in 2000. When the bill, called the Health Care Protection Act, met vocal opposition and protests in the spring, the governing Tories amended it and passed it in the fall session.

The bill opened the door to contracting out surgical procedures and private hospitals which the government called non-hospital surgical facilities.

Klein rejected the notion that his hard push for more flexibility in the delivery of health care rings hollow because Alberta is awash with cash.

Although the province announced a projected \$3.3 billion surplus Wednesday, Klein said throwing more of that money into health care is not the answer.

"You talk about a \$3.3 billion surplus," he said. "There's no guarantee it's going to be there next year or the year after."

Klein made headlines last Thursday when he suggested Alberta is prepared to withdraw from the Canada Health Act if it can't get premiers and Ottawa on side to reform the system.

While Klein stressed that withdrawing from the Act and foregoing \$1.3 billion in federal revenue would be a last resort, his comments drew attention to the premiers' call for more flexibility and funding from Ottawa.

But Alberta Liberal health critic Kevin Taft said he can't understand why Klein thinks there is a need for private hospital proposals and user fees when the province is rolling in energy resource revenue.

"What credibility does he have going into these meetings crying the blues when they have got so much money they can't hide it anymore?" he said.

Klein mused in Vancouver Monday that Alberta would even look at fancy suites and room service as luxury services offered by hospitals to help pay for health care.

While the notion was condemned by opposition parties, union leaders and health economists in Alberta, the Capital Health authority, which operates Edmonton area hospitals, said the plans are on the drawing board.

The health authority is considering a privately operated facility next to the University of Alberta Hospital that would offer luxuries with a minimum of medical care.