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Health-care `bickering' will end: PM

Martin wants 10-year accord

Ottawa prepared to pump in money

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OTTAWA BUREAU

KAMLOOPS, B.C.—Prime Minister Paul Martin has vowed to end the years of "feuding and bickering" he says have stood in the way of a long-term agreement with the provinces to guarantee the future of Canadian health care.

"Smoke and fury leading to absolutely no decent conclusion," he said. "I'm telling you, we're going to end this."

The Prime Minister and the premiers will hold a health-care summit this summer and Martin said they would meet for as long as it takes to reach a deal.

"As far as I'm concerned, we're going into the meeting and we're not coming out until we have a long-term agreement," he said. "We're looking at a 10-year agreement to essentially deal with the whole question of sustainability and the protection of our universal health-care system."

To make it happen, Martin said Ottawa is prepared to pump more money into the system. "But to meet the expectations of Canadians we have to do much more than simply increase the number of dollars."

He repeated his call that "deep, transformative change" is needed to reform the system, but made it clear the principles of the Canada Health Act, which guarantee universal access, are not up for negotiation.

"We have to reduce waiting lists. These are the fundamental measuring tool that all Canadians use. We have to guarantee access to doctors and to nurses, to the best diagnostic equipment when Canadians need it," he said.

His promise earned him warm applause from the 600 people who packed the lunchtime gathering organized by the Kamloops Chamber of Commerce.

Health care was front and centre in a wide-ranging talk that sounded a lot like a dress rehearsal for the stump speech he could soon be making on the election trail.

He boasted that the latest budget knocked down funding barriers to post-secondary education, began to tackle the needs of cities and delivered more cash for health care, while keeping the government's books in the black.

"It is a significant accomplishment that today, we are the only G-8 country in surplus. This is a great, great triumph for Canadians," he said.

And promising an "ambitious agenda to move Canada forward," he rhymed off a laundry list of themes that could be priorities in the party's election platform, including:

★ More cash for cities. Ottawa has delivered cash to cities through rebating the GST, but more must be done to provide them with "sources of predictable, long-term funding that will allow them to take control of their own destiny," Martin said.

★ Reforming immigration policies to woo well-qualified newcomers. "Many of the countries that once sent us their best and their brightest ... are now themselves competing to attract the immigrants."

★ More help for young children. "If children are not given the care and nurturing from 0 to 6 and if the government is not prepared to help, then the whole nation suffers later on."

★ Measures to boost Canada's military and intelligence capabilities. Calling the terror attacks in Madrid a failure in intelligence, Martin said, "The world has got to come together to find a better way of determining where the focus of terrorism is going to lie... Clearly we do face new and provocative security challenges both here and abroad."

★ Reasserting Canada's role in the world, "to speak with a persuasive voice for equality and human rights."

With an election call possibly just weeks away, Martin has been keeping a frantic schedule, criss-crossing the country.

He got a warm reception in Kamloops, traditionally Conservative country where Liberals hope to make inroads. Liberal John O'Fee, a city councillor, has a shot at unseating Conservative MP Betty Hinton.

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