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Quebec's on the cutting edge: We're all next

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Today, unions representing more than a million Quebec workers take to the streets to protest their cost-cutting provincial government's plans to contract out union jobs. This puts Quebec Premier Jean Charest on the cutting edge of the battle between governments and public-sector unions.

He's leading the charge for reform in the delivery of government services in one of Canada's most unionized jurisdictions. He has rightly come to the conclusion that if Quebec is to live within its means and remain competitive, it must change the way it delivers vital services.

Everything is on the table, including the supersensitive area of health-care delivery. The leaders of seven independent unions representing 68,000 health-care workers in Quebec have pledged to battle his plan to create more efficiency by contracting out where appropriate and merging some bargaining positions.

Make no mistake: The labour unrest that has dominated Quebec's public life in recent weeks is the first shot across the bow Canada-wide, as governments and public-sector unions square off over rising deficits and what to do about them. Mr. Charest and Quebec dominate today's headlines, but this story will soon be repeated across the country.

No surprise that last week the premiers used their Council of the Federation gathering in PEI to renew their call for Ottawa to pick up 25 per cent of the health-care bill as opposed to the 14 per cent Ottawa now pays. That simply isn't going to happen any time soon. Paul Martin cannot keep his commitment to find significant new funds for cities, dramatically increase health-care funding and still maintain a balanced federal budget.



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Any increase in federal health transfers to the provinces will fall far short of what the provinces are asking for.



With health-care costs rising as much as 10 per cent a year in most provincial jurisdictions, and with 40 per cent of most provincial budgets already going to health-care costs, the provinces have a choice: They can, as they slip into ever-increasing deficits and decline, keep pointing fingers at the feds — or they can bite the bullet, take on the unions if necessary and create a sustainable health-care system.

B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell is on the same course as Mr. Charest. The Campbell government has used Bill 29 to break up a union monopoly and privatize jobs once the exclusive domain of the public-sector B.C. Hospital Employees Union; multinationals have won contracts for housekeeping, laundry and food services in health-care facilities. Not surprisingly, the union is vehemently opposed.

But what is surprising many in traditionally polarized British Columbia is how fast the International Woodworkers of America has signed up these former government union members. The IWA has also quickly reached contracts with the multinationals that have become the workers' new employer. B.C.'s battle has pitted public-sector unions not only against government but also against their private-sector counterparts.

The B.C. Hospital Employees Union accuses the IWA of raiding its members and facilitating government privatization plans. The IWA accuses the government union of having its head in the sand. Sonny Ghag, president of IWA Local 3567, was blunt: "There are loonies in the Hospital Employees Union still living in the 1930s." Here was a private-sector union president telling the public-sector union to adapt — or get out of the way.

If the 1990s were a time for fighting deficits by shrinking governments, this decade will be known as an era in which governments either reinvent the delivery of health care — or abandon it as unsustainable.

Brian Tobin is a former federal minister of industry, and a former premier of Newfoundland and Labrador.



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