

BULLETIN

## **New provincial government must recognize value of health professionals**

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by CINDY STEWART

May 16 marked the end of a political era as British Columbians elected 77 Liberals and two New Democrats to represent them in the BC Legislature.

It is an astounding mandate and one that we will watch with a mixture of uncertainty, trepidation and, quite frankly, curiosity □ as electing a new government does not change the challenges that were present under the previous government. And nowhere are those challenges greater than in the health sector.

The new Liberal government, under Gordon Campbell, took office with two major sets of health negotiations unresolved and at critical junctures. They also took office at a time when the health sector has experienced a decade of unprecedented change. One day after becoming Premier-designate, Mr. Campbell said that in order to attract the best to this province, there must be sufficient incentives, including competitive wages and benefits. That is certainly true for HSA members, as our competitive edge has slipped and the ability for the system to retain and recruit skilled professionals has been compromised.

Unfortunately, the Liberals' response to negotiations has been to legislate health professionals back to work □ and send us back to the bargaining table with an employer that has the same mandate as when talks broke off. Not a very auspicious beginning for a new government that ran on a platform to improve health care and respect the health professionals that provide critical health services.

Now we will find out which of the promises were the real priorities. Tax cuts? Health care? Education?

For HSA, we hope that the Liberal government does not revert to the practices of the former Social Credit government, shutting out worker representatives and taking a confrontational stance with labour. While we had our frustrations with the NDP government, we were afforded the opportunity to engage government on many levels, including discussions with the Premier, cabinet ministers, MLAs, deputy ministers and other senior bureaucrats. It gave us an insight into the process of policy-making, and some understanding of the difficulty associated with balancing the many needs within the province.

Those relationships were valuable to our union, but we also believe valuable to those in government. It is critical that the new Liberal government not translate its overwhelming majority into a regime of arrogance. It would be a mistake for them to believe that their 77 seats provides them a mandate to make decisions that affect all the people in British Columbia based only on their internal debate.

From HSA's perspective, we approach this period of new government with an open, but cautious, mind. The provincial government, regardless of political stripe, is responsible for the public services that many of our members provide. As a union representing a critical and essential part of the health system as well as representing workers in the Community Social Service sector, we expect that our views, and those of our

members, would be sought out and considered valuable. Whether the door is open or whether it is closed, we will continue to engage government on the issues important to HSA members. It is now up to the new government to signal the tone and tenor of the relationship.

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