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Ford Throne Speech Raises Red Flags: Coalition Calls for new Government to Rebuild & Expand Public Health Care While Warning About Major Cuts

The new Doug Ford government's Speech from the Throne was read by Ontario's Lieutenant Governor General at 2 p.m. today. Mostly it was a regurgitation of Mr. Ford's campaign messages, with a few new twists. The one that may have the most relevance for health care -- and indeed all public services -- is a plan to launch a "Commission of Inquiry" into the province's finances. This will likely be the method through which the Ford government will attempt to sell its program of downsizing public services to Ontarians as "necessary" and "urgent". When the Fords were in power in Toronto they used the line-by-line service review to try to privatize public services such as the City-owned long-term care homes. We stopped them.

Mr. Ford has said he will find \$6 billion in cuts (what he calls "efficiencies"). The OHC has warned and continues to warn that this already huge number is even bigger if we look at Mr. Ford's cornerstone pledges to cut the revenues that fund all of our social programs and services including health care. The total cut to provincial revenues amounts to \$22 billion over three years -- this would be the biggest cut in our province's history if it goes through. As we have noted, by way of comparison, using today's dollars (same as the \$22 billion over three years in cuts planned by Ford) the Harris government cut \$15 billion in its first four years. This means that Mr. Ford, at this point, is proposing deeper cuts to the province's budget capacity than Mike Harris did. Which leads us to the key question for this government -- where are they going to find this massive amount of money?

We should note that there is empty rhetoric aplenty in the Throne Speech as in the election campaign. Mr. Ford promised "stable" health care funding but no actual amount. It could be a stable funding freeze, for example. He pledged to talk with nurses and doctors (again ignoring patients and the rest of the health care team) but has made three major announcements so far with no consultation of anyone but government insiders and partisan vested interests. The actual dollars to be cut are the only real numbers that have come out so far.

On the day after he was sworn in, Mr. Ford cut OHIP+ in a move that will be unlikely to save much if any money. Further this terrible plan will require a massive bureaucracy and leave families with sick children with a more onerous process to get funding for needed drugs, and which is a total gift to the private drug insurance industry at the cost of sick kids.

Mr. Ford has also imposed a hiring freeze in the public service. (Note: It is not clear to us whether this includes the LHINs which provide home care services. We are trying to find out.) A hiring freeze is a cut -- as workers leave they are not replaced and the workforce is reduced by attrition. What does this mean in real terms? Where it has been tried, it has been devastating. In Ontario's hospitals attrition has left thousands of vacant positions. The workforce has been downsized to the lowest levels in Canada while workloads have grown to impossible proportions. Imagine a nurse trying to care for more and more full-care patients, forced to ignore those patients that are hitting the call bell because she just can't keep up. Or a porter having to race from call to call and patients left waiting to go for diagnostic tests and surgeries because they can't keep up

with their workloads. Or transcription of patient records falling behind. Or fewer cleaners to clean hospital spaces. All of these things and more have happened as a result of this exact approach -- cutting the workforce by attrition. They may not call it a cut. They may call it an "efficiency". But really it is a cut.

The Health Coalition -- while working to push the Ford government to commit to a positive program of rebuilding hospital and long-term care capacity, reopening closed beds and ORs, restoring services in the public and non-profit system as well as improving home care -- is also mobilizing its membership to protect public health care. The Coalition is warning about the dangerous ideas that have been proposed in Conservative circles --- major restructuring including mega-mergers of public hospitals, cuts, and privatization of our hospitals and their services, long-term care, home care and primary care.

The Coalition has called for a major rally -- Rebuild & Improve Public Health Care: No to Cuts and Privatization! at Queen's Park at noon on Tuesday, October 23.

Those who are interested in coming and helping to get people out, please email us at ohc@sympatico.ca