

Nick Lepora

NL: My name's Nick Lepora. I'm the president of the Calgary and District Labour Council.

Q: You were telling us a story about your involvement with Friends of Medicare.

NL: Well it was not an involvement with Friends of Medicare. We were talking about Ted Woynillowicz, I believe that's his name. Ya, he represents Friends of Medicare here in Calgary. He's pretty big, and he's been with them for a long time and he's done a lot of work. He put together a coalition of the willing. People who wanted to fight for Medicare or healthcare, but in a specific kind of Calgary concept, at first. It then grew bigger and they decided to call it ABC, Alberta Better Care. It was a coalition of many different groups of people. A lot of Friends of Medicare people, but then also Peggy Askin, who used to be, is a past president of the Labour Council, who's very active with social issues. She came and she asked me if I was interested and I would go down to a meeting with Ted and a group of other people. We wanted to make sure that we got the message out. We kind of built it around the nurses. I forget what it was called now. We have a brochure here. We'll just sort of hold on here a minute while I try and remember what the thing was called. It was the nurses' campaign; it was a UNA campaign called the Wrong Way. Ya it was, the Wrong Way campaign. We decided that what we would do is we'd try and get a group of people together and we'd try and mobilize people. This was back in December 2009. It wasn't that long after I first kind of came into the position of president that Peggy decided that we should try and get me on board to help out. In the Wrong Way campaign, we had a rally down at Olympic Plaza. It was a really rotten day, lots of snow, very unpleasant. We marched down 7th Avenue, no not 7th Avenue, we marched down the mall and distributed various handouts, flyers. That was our first, that was our first; that was our first thing that we did with Alberta Better Care. Then it kind of died away for a little bit, because of course it was Christmas time and people didn't really want to get going and things. I sent an email out to some people who were involved – Lisa Lorenzetti and Bonnie Malach, who are activists out there, and suggested that maybe we should do a town hall. A fellow from the northeast, Jagtar Singh, he was very keen on the whole idea of putting together a seminar to inform people about what they're about to lose. So we did that, we organized that, and we held it at the Rundle Community Hall. It was actually quite successful. The rally that we had down at Olympic Plaza, really we only got about 100 people out. It wasn't really that successful, although we had publicized it really well and we used the Labour Council to send out invitations to come to all the affiliates. But it's December and people have other priorities. They don't want to demonstrate when it's bad weather. But the Rundle one, the Rundle Hall Community Center, that was pretty good. We had a lot of people there. We pretty much filled up the community hall. We had Judy Wasylycia, who is an NDP healthcare critic, I think, for the NDP. She came and so did David Eggen. We had a group of people. We threw it open to the floor and a lot of people stood up. What really was very interesting was there was a lot of what do you call

it, I want to be politically correct – ethnic groups came. Sheikhs and specifically a large number of people from the East Indian community came. I think that was a lot to do with the fact that Jagtar was out there beating the bushes to try to get people to come. They're very well informed, very keen that we should keep our healthcare in tact. I think they've probably come from places where they don't have very good healthcare. They see what you have when everything's up for grabs.

Q: What sort of comments were they making?

NL: What did they say? Basically they're very concerned, because a lot of them bring their whole families over. They're especially concerned about elder care, older people and how healthcare is going to basically, the lack of healthcare could seriously impact them. When these people aren't wealthy... I know a lot of people have the idea, oh well they come over here and they bring their families and they're extremely wealthy and they don't have any problems. That's not the truth. The truth is that they're struggling citizens just like us, and they have huge families that they support too. Contrary to what most people believe, they're not a drain on society.

Q: What was the major issue last December?

NL: The specific issue was that there were going to be cuts, serious cuts. We would lose beds, we would lose staff. And of course because there was such a push made by Friends of Medicare and Alberta Better Care, the government turned tail. So consequently the cuts didn't come as steeply and as heavily as people originally thought they would. To be quite honest, I think, I heard some comments that, oh well you see we're just scare-mongering. They didn't do that. But no, that's not the truth. The truth is that they were frightened of the public groundswell of support to keep Medicare and to not cut. These people, they don't really care much about what the public thinks unless it impacts on their jobs. So the only reason that we didn't have huge cuts was just something to keep the masses quiet and to stop the stampede from the centre-right to the extreme right.

Q: Why is Medicare important?

NL: That's pretty tough. I don't think there's any one thing that I can think of that you could just, a magic bullet to say, you've gotta keep every aspect of Medicare because you've gotta keep Medicare because, and then there are all sorts of things that will flow on from there. You need the fact that, you need to keep our Medicare system going because basically what's going to happen if we don't keep on the ball, we're going to end up with a mostly privatized system which will look probably not exactly like the American system but it'll look something worse than the British system, which isn't that good at the moment. There's a lot of privatized medicine over there. It won't be cheaper and more accessible; it will never be that. These people, you have to realize that once private industry has its foot in the door, they have to make a profit. That's the whole deal. They're only there for one thing – to make a profit. They're not there to make you well, they're there to make a profit off of sick people. They're going to do it off the taxpayer's dollar. Don't think that suddenly it's going to be cheaper for you. They still have to pay,

they will still have to pay nurses, they will still have to pay staff. These people will still have to be trained, because it's no good having a janitor doing OR stuff. Plus the fact that on top of everything else they have to make a profit. So whatever happens, their profit is going on top. Plus the fact that it's all going to be funded by your money out of your pocket, the taxpayer's pocket. They intend to keep a veneer of healthcare, i.e. we will give them money and then they will give it to private people.

Q: That's a good answer.

NL: My mother told me the stories about what it used to be like in the UK before the Second World War. You had to pay for everything. There was no healthcare, nothing at all. You looked after your parents the best you could. If people were destitute, there was, okay there was charity that you could fall on. But you didn't want to fall on that stuff; you didn't want to go back to that. You were means tested. You were means tested by the government for the handouts. My mother used to live in Hull. She said they used to go out and pick up coal that fell off the trucks that went to the docks. That's how people heated their houses. They didn't have any money to buy coal, so they used to pick it up off the trucks that were going by and take it home in a bathtub to heat the house and warm the water and cook their food. They would be inspected. They would come around and knock on the door and they would ask you; they would demand that they come in, if you were receiving government help for medicines. They would look around your house and they would see, that's irrelevant, pictures, you have to sell this stuff, pawn it off. You've got a basic thing, a table to eat off. How many people in the family? Four. Four chairs, that's all you need. How many beds? You only need two beds. How many sets of sheets? You only need one set of sheets. She said people used to bury their, they used to go out and bury, if they had an idea that the means testers were coming they would go out and they would bury their heirlooms in the garden, things that were precious to them. That's a system that they worked in before there was a National Health Service, brought in by of course a Labour government in 1946 or '47.

Q: Albertans usually don't go out and protest, yet they rose up again and again for our healthcare system. Why do you suppose that's the case?

NL: Why the public support? Because I think that, whoever you are, it doesn't matter if you're an ordinary citizen... I'm not talking about the upper 10% who own the companies, who work in the big high paying oilpatch positions. The vast majority of people in this province working the city toiling away, they're not making very much money. They really, really rely on healthcare. They want healthcare, they need it. It's something they feel is a basic right. They pay for it; they want it supplied to them constantly. They don't want it undermined. I was talking to a friend in Lethbridge and they said, you know the absolute groundswell of anger that there might be cuts to the system here in Lethbridge was amazing. This is a really right-wing countryside down here. I said, well that's the funny thing. It doesn't matter really amongst ordinary people which side of the political spectrum you are on. You can be out there with a tiller on the right-hand side, but you still want your healthcare. That's a funny thing. It doesn't matter where you sit, if you try and mess with that, and that's what happened with our

government here. They suddenly realized, oh look, our rural base, they're the ones that always, it doesn't matter if we bring out a donkey with a PC jacket on, they'll vote for it. But suddenly the donkey's starting to say, we need to cut this stuff and privatize and we're going to cut beds here. You promised us there'd be an old folks home here and wherever. That was your election promise and suddenly you turn around and, oh it's not going to happen now. No, we voted for you for that, we put you there. That's very important. That's why I think it's one of the, I don't think I've ever seen anything. I've lived here since 1976. I used to think this was a dead place. I used to think nobody cares anything about politics here at all – it's horrible. There's no political discussion. That was in the '70s. The only political discussion was "we hate Eastern Canada". That seemed kind of like a knee-jerk reaction, just stupid. But no, I've never seen anything that's politicized people like the healthcare.

[END]