

## 19. Political Will

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A reformed public health system requires a major injection of resources. The Naylor, Kirby, and interim Walker reports analyzed the need for a critical mass of scientific and medical expertise, more capacity to educate, recruit, and retain public health professionals, increased laboratory capacity, and improved technology. Further recommendations are expected in the final Walker report. Significant financial resources will be needed to give Ontario's public health system any reasonable capacity for protection against infectious disease.

The decline of public health protection in Ontario reflects a consistent lack of political will, over the regime of many successive governments and all three political parties, to bring up to a reasonable standard the systems that protect us against infectious disease.

Competition for tax dollars is fierce. It is not easy in a time of fiscal constraint for any government to make additional funds available for any public programme. It will require significant political will on the part of the Minister of Health and the Ontario government to commit the funds and the long-term resolve that are required to bring our public health protection against infectious disease up to a reasonable standard.

It would be very easy, now that the SARS outbreak is over, to put public health reform on the back burner. It is a general habit of governments to respond to a crisis by making a few improvements without fixing the underlying problems responsible for the crisis. It would be a tragedy if that turned out to be the case with SARS. As the Naylor Report pointed out:

SARS is simply the latest in a series of recent bellwethers for the fragile state of Canada's . . . public health systems. The pattern is now familiar. Public health is taken for granted until disease outbreaks occur, whereupon a brief flurry of lip service leads to minimal investments and little real change in public health infrastructure or priorities. This cycle must end.<sup>173</sup>

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173. Naylor Report, p. 64.

Ontario, as demonstrated in this interim report, slept through many wake-up calls. Again and again the systemic flaws were pointed out, again and again the very problems that emerged during SARS were predicted, again and again the warnings were ignored.

The Ontario government has a clear choice. If it has the necessary political will, it can make the financial investment and the long-term commitment to reform that is required to bring our public health protection against infectious disease up to a reasonable standard. If it lacks the necessary political will, it can tinker with the system, make a token investment, and then wait for the death, sickness, suffering and economic disaster that will come with the next outbreak of disease.

The strength of the government's political will can be measured in the months ahead by its actions and its long-term commitments.