

Smitherman vs. the Doctors

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George Smitherman will forever be remembered as the Ontario health minister who suggested he would "deputize" Ontarians to join in his personal jihad against an American medical company offering diagnostic medical tests to Ontario residents through mobile vans. But that outburst, in which he vowed to "meet them at the border or confront them where they are," was more laughable than dangerous -- Mr. Smitherman's overreaction being such an obvious attempt to curry favour with left-wing voters.

Mr. Smitherman's latest crusade, on the other hand, is far more troubling. This time, it's not a few American diagnostic specialists he's set in his sights: It's Canada's doctors.

We would have hoped that the man in charge of health care in the country's largest province would be interested in what those actually providing the care have to say. Instead, when doctors signalled their dissatisfaction with the status quo by electing the co-founder of a private clinic in British Columbia as the new president of the Canadian Medical Association, Mr. Smitherman evidently went on the warpath.

"They have just elected a guy ... who believes in a system where well-off Canadians can pay to get faster treatment," Mr. Smitherman said of CMA president-elect Brian Day in a speech to the Economic Club of Toronto on Monday. "For years we have been shadow-boxing with often obscure voices agitating for two-tier health care. Now Canada's doctors have selected one of the country's most prominent private providers to lead them."

It's true that Dr. Day is a well-known advocate of greater flexibility within the public system -- not just another paper tiger. But as of next year, he will also be the democratically elected leader of the men and women who Canadians rely upon to save the lives of themselves and their loved ones. That Mr. Smitherman has already decided to go to war with those people hardly bodes well for the health care interests of Ontarians.

But then, that would hardly seem to be Mr. Smitherman's foremost interest anyway. As Ontario Conservative MPP and former health minister Elizabeth Witmer said Monday, the Health Minister appears to be testing out populist themes in advance of next year's provincial election. The timing of this week's attack hardly seems a coincidence, given that Mr. Smitherman's Liberals tomorrow face a by-election in which they are running neck-and-neck with the NDP.

It is bad enough that Mr. Smitherman refuses to adopt a more open-minded approach toward private care, which would reduce wait times by alleviating the burden on the public system while compelling it to provide Ontarians with better service. It is even worse that he is willing to alienate doctors in search of a few extra votes.