

Arthritis advocacy and politics.

Getting arthritis on the political agenda - a member's perspective

By: Linda Wilhelm

Elections present the opportunity for Canadians to rate the performance of their elected officials, to deliver a message to their government and to draw attention to the issues that affect their lives.

In 1999, the issue that was closest to the hearts of New Brunswickers was a toll highway that connected major centres in the province. Progressive Conservative (PC) leader, Bernard Lord, seized this issue during the spring election campaign. Even though the highway was near completion, and in some cases tolls were already being collected, the Liberal government was ousted and the PCs voted-in with a huge majority.

In 2003, the tollbooths long gone, the PCs campaigned on Lord's record. They were confident, strong, and, for the most part, ignored the issue now closest to the hearts of New Brunswickers - the exorbitant increase in the cost of car insurance. The Liberals and New Democrats (NDP) seized this issue and two weeks into the campaign, the PCs acknowledged that the insurance issue would have a significant outcome on election results.

On June 8, 2003, the day before the election, the PCs held 47 seats, the Liberals seven, and the NDP, one. The day after the election the PCs had 28 seats, the Liberals 26, and the NDP, one. A recount was called in one riding where the PC candidate won by only 16 votes. Loss of that seat would have created an election tie. No longer can anyone say that one vote does not matter. .

Within the next few weeks, the premiers of Ontario and Prince Edward Island will test their popularity at the polls. People with arthritis and those advocating for people with arthritis need to make their presence felt. Arthritis care, access to arthritis professionals, access to medications, and catastrophic drug coverage, must be on the election agenda. It may not be an issue to bring down a government, but it needs to be addressed. Begin by building relationships with all candidates. They need to know our expectations. Getting on the radar screens of politicians is critical to improving care for Canadians with arthritis. Remember, just 16 votes stood between a majority government and a tie in New Brunswick.