

The NHS's 70th. Birthday

Richard Leonard's speech in the Scottish Parliament debate

26 June 2018

Motion debated,

That the Parliament celebrates 5 July 2018 as the 70th anniversary of the founding of the NHS; agrees with the words of its founder, Aneurin Bevan, that it is “a triumphant example of the superiority of collective action and public initiative”; believes that, each and every day, both in Central Scotland and throughout the country, there are countless examples of the importance and success of the NHS; thanks all health service staff, past and present, for their compassion and dedication in delivering care to people in need, and wishes the NHS a happy 70th birthday.

The text of Richard’s speech :

As we celebrate and reflect on 70 years of the national health service in this debate, let us remind ourselves of the vision for a healthy nation that was first outlined in Labour’s 1945 manifesto.

It read:

“By good food and good homes, much avoidable ill-health can be prevented. In addition the best health services should be available free for all. Money must no longer be the passport to the best treatment. In the new National Health Service there should be health centres where the people may get the best that modern science can offer, more and better hospitals, and proper conditions for our doctors and nurses.”

Yet today, as in 1945, health inequalities—that glaring flaw in our society—persist.

That is precisely why tackling poverty and inequality in Scotland, and the health inequalities that result from them, should be the first priority of this Parliament.

Poverty is a moral issue.

Not only does it diminish the lives of the people who are caught up in it, it diminishes us all.

It holds us back as a country, weakens our society and hinders our economy.

It is the cause of much preventable ill health.

That is why we cannot carry on as we are, with poverty deepening and inequality widening.

I pay tribute to all the staff who work so hard to keep our NHS going, day in and day out, night in and night out, caring for and curing our sick.

They deserve better support than they are getting from this Government.

It is not just NHS staff who are being let down, but NHS patients, too.

Patients, many of them elderly, and often with underlying health conditions, are waiting for hours for an ambulance, despite repeated 999 calls, and then waiting for hours on trolleys in hospital corridors.

We have been able—at long last—to secure an independent inquiry into mental health services in Tayside, but it should not take questions to the First Minister and families marching into this Parliament demanding justice for action to be taken.

The Labour Party founded the national health service, and something that is often overlooked is that Labour's Tom Johnston, when he was appointed Secretary of State for Scotland in the wartime Cabinet in 1941, began an experiment in the Clyde basin, in which civil defence hospitals that had been set up to treat civilian war casualties, were used to treat war workers who could not afford specialist diagnosis and treatment.

He rolled out the approach across Scotland and, in so doing, drove down hospital waiting lists by 34,000, helped form the basis of the 1944 white paper and blazed a trail for the national health service of the post-war years.

Down the years, it has been always been Labour Governments that have invested in our NHS.

When Labour was last in power, spending on the national health service in Scotland doubled—not merely in cash terms but in real terms.

We scrapped the internal market and we took the Health Care International private hospital in Clydebank, which the Tories had used public money to establish, and put it into the NHS.

In the future, we will put before the people a clear choice: a decade of austerity and public expenditure cuts with the SNP and the Tories, or a decade of real and sustainable investment with Labour.

As we celebrate 70 years of the national health service, we recall its pioneers in the Labour Party, reflect on its transformative achievements and, once again, renew our commitment to an NHS that is free at the point of use; an NHS that is fully funded and resourced; an NHS that values its staff and serves its patients; and an NHS that works for the many, not the few.

The NHS is practical socialism in action—"pure Socialism", as Bevan described it.

That, in the end, is the Labour Party's defining idea.

The heralding of the NHS 70 years ago meant the end of insurance stamps, the means test and endless queues.

Medical care was no longer connected to ability to pay.

General practitioners stopped having to compete for business and joined forces as part of a medical team.

It became a single service and a national service.

Commercial principles were replaced with collective action and public initiative.

That is a powerful and enduring idea, which we will defend with every sinew in our bodies, but it should not be limited in its application to our national health service.

It would be well applied in responding to growing demands to provide care for the elderly, which is an area in which we are seeing commercial principles and a market-based approach pulling us into a crisis; to social care, so that we can support the human rights of disabled people, remove the profit motive and pay carers a proper rate of pay; and also in the field of public transport, and the provision of energy supply and distribution in housing.

The possibilities are limitless.

In 2018, it is time that we started to learn the lessons of 1948.

The national health service was created when the country was almost bankrupt.

It is time that we started to think big and act radically.

It is time that we recaptured the spirit of that 1945 Government and it is time that we once again applied those enduring and timeless principles to our times.