NEW GOVERNMENT—NEW START FOR HEALTH?

The Labour Party came to power in Britain on 1 May 1997 for the first time in 19 years. The government promised to have a Minister for Public Health and Tessa Jowell was given this post. This is in addition to the Secretary of State for Health, Frank Dobson, who invariably gets tied down to more health service issues and the National Health Service (NHS). Of course, in Scotland health is dealt with by Scottish Ministers at the Scottish Office. At the Scottish Office Department of Health, Mr Sam Galbraith, the Scottish Minister for Health, covers both the NHS and health generally. Incidentally, Sam Galbraith is a neurosurgeon who went into politics in 1987 when he won the Strathkelvin and Bearsden seat for Labour. He is also a past (elected) member of the General Medical Council and was active in both the Socialist Health Association and the Medical Practitioners’ Union. He knows the health service intimately and has maintained an active interest in medical research until his appointment as Minister. He also has direct experience of the health service as a patient having had a lung transplant several years ago.

After a promising start, the government ran into the problem of exempting Formula 1 motor racing from the proposed European Union tobacco advertising and sponsorship ban. It subsequently transpired that Bernie Ecclestone, a key figure in Formula 1 racing, had paid £1 million to the Labour Party before the election. Although nobody is suggesting that the two events are linked, the handling of the affair by the government has detracted from the measures taken by it to improve health and health services. These include a ban on tobacco advertising and sponsorship (other than Formula 1), a recognition of the determinants of health and a commitment to tackle poverty, a proposed National Food Agency, a White Paper on health care (to remove the ‘purchaser–provider’ split in the NHS), and a Green Paper on improving health early in 1998.

So far, the response from health care providers in the NHS has been positive in that at least there are to be no sudden changes in the NHS but rather an evolution of the service. This is welcome after years of perpetual revolution with things such as the internal market (the purchaser–provider split of health services), general practice fundholders (GPFHs) who ‘purchase’ secondary services, changes in general practitioners’ contracts, and changes to membership of health boards to induce a more ‘business-like’ approach to the NHS.

A crucial test of the Labour Government will be when decisions are taken about the funding of the NHS in the Budget and beyond. Until now the government has said it will stick to the last Conservative Government’s public sector spending limits for the next two years—although the Chancellor did find extra resources for the NHS (and education) in the mini-Budget in July. Traditionally, the Labour Party has been the party of the NHS ever since the post-war Labour Government of Clement Attlee created the NHS in 1948 basing access to health care on need rather than the ability to pay. Now, with Labour sticking to Conservative spending plans for the next two years—although the Chancellor did find extra resources for the NHS (and education) in the mini-Budget in July. Tradition-
The death of some one close helps people to put things into perspective—the what and who is important to them in life and the why it is important. Even if we do not share all these feelings with the relatives and friends of every patient who dies, we should not forget that they will have all these feelings and much more for a loved one who has died. In some ways, every death should spur health professionals to reflect if they could have done things differently or better.

REFERENCES

H. S. KOHLI

Letter from Chennai

MONSOON DELIGHTS
The year gone by has been Chennai's wettest year this century—157 cm of rainfall with ten days of the year left. Not quite Cherrapunji, but substantial. The lakes that supply the city are full and overflowing for the first time since 1985, and we will have no worries about water next summer. Why are we not happy?

The first casualty of every downpour is the electricity supply. When the skies darken, we have no power to brighten our homes. We reach for the telephone to call the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB). Not that it helps much. It is more psychotherapy for ourselves, giving us a feeling that we have done something to rectify the situation. It makes no difference, for power is restored only when the TNEB and its minions deign to look our way. It does not take much rain to put the telephone out of commission. A couple of heavy showers, and the telephone is dead. It is not much consolation when the newspaper informs us next morning that we are not alone, that 4000 others share our plight. For a doctor who has always kept himself available on the telephone to patients from all over the country, there is a feeling of guilt, of not being there to help when his patients need him. It does not make a difference to Madras Telephones, which will restore the line 'in due course'.

Our woes do not end there. We have 63 km of storm water drains in the city. They must all be blocked with silt or some other equally efficient sealing material. Within minutes of the onset of anything more than a gentle shower, Chennai becomes Venice, and the roads are replaced by canals. When you drive through a puddle of water, you do not see the road surface, so you are unaware of the hazards. Two thousand cast iron manhole covers were stolen, for they are indeed valuable. Your car wheel may be unaware of the fact that we were tempting fate. Today, we step in puddles and wells up onto the roads, bringing with it the urine of rats and the roads are replaced by canals. When you drive through a puddle of water, you do not see the road surface, so you are unaware of the hazards. Two thousand cast iron manhole covers were stolen, for they are indeed valuable. Your car wheel may be unaware of the fact that we were tempting fate. Today, we step in puddles and wells up onto the roads, bringing with it the urine of rats.

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I recollect the joy with which my classmates and I, schoolchildren in Madras 50 years ago, greeted the monsoon. When it rained heavily, we had a rain holiday. When the roads were flooded, we joyously played games in the puddles and lakes on the roads, unaware of the fact that we were tempting fate. Today, we step in these puddles with trepidation. We cannot avoid them if we wish to pursue our normal lives through the months of the monsoon. Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise.

Not all our troubles can be blamed on the Corporation and Metrowater. I happened to drive to a friend's place on Deepavali night. The air was thick with the smoke of millions of rupees worth of fireworks, and visibility was down to a few metres. It was like the old movies of London in the days of the pea soup fogs. What would happen to an asthmatic in this atmosphere? One might argue that the poor workers who make the fireworks would benefit from the sale, but how much of the money actually goes to them? Can we not convince the rich of our cities that they can device more joy, and with fewer risks to their person, if they spend this money on some constructive purpose?

Of the many fine institutions of independent India, we can justly be proud of our Planning Commission. In the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980–85), the Commission said: 'From the 106 medical...