

# The reshuffle that wasn't

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**Speculation was intense, but in the event, as some readers will be aware, July brought almost no significant change in the Government .**



The only change at Health was Baroness Hayman's move to agriculture — to be replaced as Minister of State for Health in the Lords by Lord Hunt of Kings Heath. Created a life peer in 1997 by Tony Blair, Philip Hunt was long involved with the National Association of Health Authorities and Trusts (now the NHS Confederation) and is known to be in favour of water fluoridation. The Department of Health also has a new Under Secretary of State in Gisela Stuart — one of 1997's Blairite intake.

Blair was unable to do more in the way of reshuffling while the Northern Ireland peace process was (and remains) in such a delicate state — making it impossible to move Mo Mowlam. This did leave him open, however, to 'Night of the short knives' headlines. Perhaps the most comic charge raised against the PM was William Hague's suggestion that Blair was guilty of weak leadership. Eagle-eyed readers may have noticed that some of the same day's papers reported that a pot had called a kettle black...

## Progress on fluoridation

Tessa Jowell's Public Health White Paper finally appeared in the first week of July, under the title *Saving Lives — Our Healthier Nation*. Its contents were not unexpected — having been revealed in a Health Service Journal article in June, when the magazine was apparently leaked a final draft of the document. The HSJ stated that the version they saw had only to go to Downing Street for approval before it was published — which would seem to suggest that the leak had been sanctioned.

An expert scientific review of water fluoridation has been commissioned, and if this confirms the health benefits of fluoridation there will be a change in the law. The document states — encouragingly — that only 'a small but vocal minority' are opposed to fluoridation, and that 'to ensure that the extent and validity of ... public support is beyond all doubt, we

envisage transferring from health authorities to local authorities the requirement to undertake public consultation on fluoridating the local water supply'.

In Scotland, Health Boards will remain responsible for public consultation. Susan Deacon, the health minister in Scotland, is known to be strongly in favour of fluoridation, and is reported to have written to every health board already to tell them to begin consultations 'as a priority' to gauge public support. Deacon is also said to be seeking an early date for a parliamentary debate on the subject.

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## Other legislation

One major piece of legislation affecting dentists has recently finished its journey through Parliament. The Health Act abolishes fundholding and establishes Primary Care Trusts (formerly Primary Care Groups or Local Health Groups in Wales) to commission services in their area. The Act also makes it a criminal offence to evade NHS patient charges, making it possible to penalise evaders — and if necessary take cases to a Magistrates' Court. It also introduces an order-making power, allowing changes to be made in the professional regulatory acts (including the Den-

tists Act). Lobbying by the BDA, among others, ensured that safeguards on consultation and the continuing role of the GDC are in place.

## Scottish students and their money

The deal between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the Scottish Parliament has meant that Conservatives and Scottish Nationalists are finding themselves in the previously unusual position of not only agreeing with each other, but also voting together — in particular on the issue of tuition fees. An SNP amendment to 'bring forward to the Parliament proposals for the abolition of tuition fees' was 'disagreed to' thanks to the combined weight of Liberal Democrat and Labour votes (giving Tories the opportunity to accuse the Lib Dems of treachery). The matter has now been referred to an independent committee of inquiry. The Tories and the SNP tried to get the membership of the committee altered to include more actual students — a move which might have made abolition rather more likely. Despite the Lib Dems' insistence that they remain committed to abolition, they again supported Labour — ensuring that the number of students on the committee comes to just one.

## To be expected?

Following the political profit made by Labour during the election campaign in 1997 at the expense of 'Tory sleaze', questions have been raised about the use of taxpayers' money in Scotland. The media has made much of the fact that one of the first subjects discussed by new MSPs was their allowances for office and staff expenses. They have also been criticised for rejecting draft civil service guidance advising them not to employ members of their families as secretaries and researchers. Donald Dewar himself has been criticised for appointing special advisers to the Scottish Executive's policy unit. Plus ça change ...

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