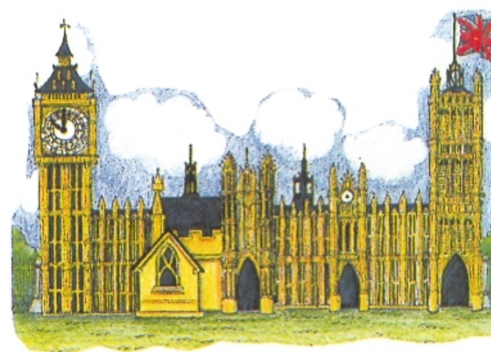


Tony's magic wand

C Coates*

The party conference season can always be relied on for sheer entertainment, but rarely provides much of interest to dentists. This year proved to be an exception.



Amid all the slickness and stage management, Labour unveiled some policies, and — for the first time ever, as far as anyone knows — the BDA was name-checked in the Prime Minister's address to the faithful. "Working with the British Dental Association," he said, "everyone within the next two years will be able once again to see an NHS dentist just by phoning NHS Direct."

This is encouraging news — even to those practitioners who have been a little cynical about the idea of NHS Direct being a panacea for NHS dentistry's ills. Labour seems finally to have realised that there might be votes in dentistry. The question is how — and the BDA will be working with the government on this issue.

We do know that callers to NHS Direct will be referred to an NHS dentist "within convenient travelling distance" — and that 30 "phone and go" schemes across the country will improve access. As yet, it is unclear whether the government will be spending the sort of money the BDA asked for in its recent DDRB evidence — the more sceptical among the profession might want to substitute "unlikely" for "unclear".

What all this probably does confirm is that Blair was already certain what he would be doing in the reshuffle (that followed a couple of weeks later) by the time he made the speech — and that he planned to make Alan Milburn the new Health Secretary whether or not Frank Dobson had been persuaded to stand for mayor. Blair is unlikely to have risked making the commitment unless he knew he would have a faithful ally and a proven achiever in the key post. Dobson must have sensed that he has a good chance of getting the Labour Party's mayoral nomination — and the job itself — and had the intelligence to realise that it was that job or no job.

Scotland: Sleaze and Water

North of the border, the Scottish Parliament has become embroiled in a similar "scandal" to the 'Drapergate' incident which caused the Labour government at Westminster minor irritation earlier in its term of office. In that case, well-connected lobbyist Derek Draper boasted of the

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access he could provide his clients to Labour high command. Similar claims have been made by Kevin Reid of Beattie Media (a Scottish lobbying firm, now defunct as a result of the allegations). Mr Reid happens to be the son of one John Reid — who happens to be Scottish Secretary. It is likely, however, that this will also turn out to be a minor problem, rather than the tip of any "Labour sleaze" iceberg — for the simple reason that what some lobbyists promise and what they actually deliver are rarely one and the same thing.

The good news from Scotland is that water fluoridation appears to be progressing there rather more quickly than it is in the rest of the UK. Health is one of the

devolved powers, so the Scots can go ahead with it if they want to — and Susan Deacon, the Scottish Health Minister, is in the process of finding out what the Scots people want at the moment. It is to be hoped that the result will be one which will benefit their traditionally poor oral health.

Common sense

William Hague's keynote speech to his party's conference was seen by most commentators as his political coming of age. Sadly for Hague, the Guardian's sketchwriter, Simon Hoggart, may be correct in saying: "He looks like an important party leader. All he needs now is to find an important political party to lead". For — while politics' most famous baseball cap wearer might be putting his failures behind him — other aspects of his party's past continue to hang over him. His attempts to unveil new "common sense" policies were somewhat overshadowed by Lady Thatcher's not altogether sensible decision to suggest that Europe is the source of all evil and that General Pinochet is a political prisoner. Whatever one's views on either subject, common sense would suggest that a little moderation might have helped. Hague was also not helped by Denis Thatcher's sotto voce observation to Ffion Hague at an otherwise carefully stage-managed photo opportunity: "These things get more inane every year" he said — when a BBC camera was just a little too close.

So, dental health may improve in Scotland — and NHS dentistry might just be dragged back from the edge of the precipice. However, one definite lesson from the party conference season was that, whether you like them or not, you had better get used to Labour's policies — on health as well as everything else. Nobody else's are likely to be implemented for a long time yet.

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