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Speech in the Scottish Parliament

National Health Service – 60th. Anniversary

I commend Bill Butler for lodging the motion, which celebrates what is best about the NHS and which enshrines its original set of principles. The NHS was the flagship policy for waging a new war against the old enemies that have already been mentioned this evening:

"Want ... Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness."

That spirit meant that the NHS would treat everyone the same, regardless of their status or income.

That led to a health service that was funded out of general taxation, so that people received medical care irrespective of their ability to pay, thus removing one of the greatest pre-war worries for the people of this country: how they could afford to pay for treatment if they fell sick or were injured.

For at least the past decade, health priorities have moved further towards preventive action rather than merely focusing on ill health.

Under a Labour-led Executive, groundbreaking and targeted initiatives were launched to reduce health inequalities, including the promotion of smoking cessation, high-quality nutrition and physical exercise. We look forward to such work continuing.

It interesting to look to the US for comparison.

It was a presidential election year 60 years ago, and the opponents of President Harry S Truman were attempting to demonise his proposals to introduce national health insurance as "socialized medicine".

As has already been said, in contrast to universal provision, the US model of health insurance results in more than 46 million people—16 per cent of the US population—including more than 8 million children, not having health insurance.

It is presidential election year again in the US, and the need for a universal health care system is still an issue.

Democratic Party candidate-elect Barack Obama told CBS News:

"I am absolutely determined that by the end of the first term of the next president, we should have universal health care in this country."

I pay particular tribute to the workforce of NHS Tayside.

Since 2000, the number of treatment episodes involving in-patients, day cases and new and returning out-patients has exceeded 4 million.

That is thanks to the commitment, dedication and professionalism of NHS Tayside, which is deeply valued by the communities that it serves.

The motion is absolutely right to ask that

"all citizens, trade unions and politicians should remain true to the founding principles of the NHS."

I sound a cautionary note, however, as concern has been raised in Dundee about efficiency savings, which have been proposed because of the budget settlement.

I share those concerns.

The values of the NHS offer a model for creating a better, more caring society.

What we do with the NHS is, manifestly, how we will be judged by the electorate.

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WEBSITE LINK

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