

# State healthcare under Scottish referendum spotlight

September 10 2014, by Patrice Novotny

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Scotland's independence referendum has thrown the spotlight on Britain's state-run National Health Service, as campaigners clash over the claim that it faces privatisation by stealth.

Scots vote on September 18 to decide whether to break away from the United Kingdom, as weekend opinion polls indicated the pro-independence camp has edged ahead for the first time.

The referendum debate has so far revolved around the currency, Scotland's precious oil resources, the armed forces and European Union membership.

Another emotive topic is the fate in Scotland of the cherished NHS, the free-to-access tax-funded service that was launched in 1948 by Britain's then-health minister Aneurin Bevan.

Pro-independence "Yes" campaigners, spearheaded by First Minister Alex Salmond, argue that the NHS in Scotland needs protection from creeping privatisation, but "No" campaigners contend that it is in safe hands.

Salmond, head of the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) and leader of Scotland's devolved government, acknowledged that the NHS plays a major part of the Scottish psyche.

## NHS 'part of identity'

"It's a fundamental part of Scotland's national identity," Salmond said last month, but added that British governments in recent years allowed the private sector to have an increasing role.

The NHS is the biggest employer in Europe and one of the largest in the world, with more than 1.35 million staff across the United Kingdom, with its four separate divisions in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

"In England, despite the protest of many, the NHS is being eroded and the founding principles handed down by Bevan have been scorned and betrayed by successive Westminster governments," added Salmond.

"It's now well understood that voting 'Yes' will allow us to protect Scotland's NHS from the threat to budgets here as a consequence of the cult of austerity and privatisation being forced on the NHS in England."

However, "No" campaigners say that argument is deceptive because the devolved Scottish Parliament already makes its own decisions on health policy, with the British government in London having no say.

"The idea that home rule inside the UK threatens the Scottish NHS is a lie. A big huge lie," said the Labour Party's Jack McConnell, who was Scotland's first minister from 2001 until 2007.

"It is their very own NHS—National Hysterical Soundbite. It is a diversion, a desperate tactic."

Salmond has said independence will protect Scotland from cuts in health spending but Alistair Darling, a Labour former finance minister who leads the Better Together campaign to keep Scotland in the UK, insists

that funding for the service was due to rise.

McConnell added: "It is because the Scottish parliament has power over the health service that the NHS in Scotland is not following the privatisation route favoured by Westminster.

"Scotland's NHS has been safe in the hands of the Scottish parliament. Even the SNP boast about that."

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