

# Silence on the NHS suits both parties, but betrays Britain

Winter is coming – and with it inevitable warnings of an NHS crisis.

What's different this time is the genuine misery faced by so many patients, some of whom are having to pay for scans and operations because of long waiting lists and strikes. What is also remarkable is how little it is being discussed by our political leaders. Last week the Health Foundation charity issued a report containing two sobering scenarios. The first had the number of people needing treatment rising to eight million next summer. The second forecast a decline to a mere 7.2 million by the end of next year – the same level as when Rishi Sunak promised to get numbers down in January. A cynic might think the government and opposition didn't want a public debate on this.

Steve Barclay, the fifth health secretary in five years, has launched a push to buy

more beds in care homes and has held the line on pay in disputes with striking doctors. But there is little in the way of strategic thinking – especially on the vexed question of social care. Wes Streeting, his Labour shadow, talks sensibly of reform and preventing illness rather than simply treating it. Yet Labour also has no real answer on social care, at a time when the tax burden is heading towards a postwar high. The debacle over Babylon apps, chronicled by Danny Fortson today, underlines the perils of relying on third-party providers for efficiency miracles.

The Conservatives owe the nation a better vision for the future of the health service. Labour, which arguably has the political space to enact genuine change, needs to spell out exactly what it would do. As things stand, neither is anywhere near untangling this Gordian knot.