EDITORIAL

YES, IT’S historic and it’s about time. No, not the Labour victory (although you may think that, I couldn’t possibly comment) – but the fact that last Thursday saw the first ever qualified nurses elected to the House of Commons. It will take some time for the excitement and shock of the election result to die down. But as the euphoria or disappointment subsides, it will be replaced by practical questions about what all this means for you, your family and the NHS.

Nurses are hoping that, like Labour’s familiar election signature tune from D:Ream: ‘Things... can only get better!’ There is a sense of optimism about the prospect of a new government but there is also a sense of expectation. The new government will be busy balancing its own agenda for change in the health services and the one it is inheriting from the outgoing team.

Among issues nurses can expect the new health team to address is the lifting of gagging clauses. The party has pledged to issue ‘immediate guidance’ to health authorities and trusts on the matter. It also has plans to pilot nurse-led recuperation services for elderly people and will establish a Royal Commission on long-term funding for elderly care – an issue close to many nurses’ hearts.

The new team will also be busy on pay. Labour is dispensing with local pay and moving back to national determination. There are differing views, however, on what that might mean. Nurses will be anxiously awaiting the outcome of the pending consultation with nursing organisations on this issue. Chris Smith also told Nursing Standard that a Labour government would amass evidence on clinical grading to see whether it provides nurses with an effective means of career progression. An announcement about a package of family friendly policies can also be expected to improve recruitment and retention of nurses.

On quality, Labour has pledged a new national audit team. It will be established with the help of the Audit Commission and work alongside it, but focus on quality rather than finance. The party also wants new performance measures and to collect central statistics on readmission rates and hospital acquired infection.

Labour has plans for more than one ‘moratorium’. It calls for a complete suspension of bed closures in London, pending a review of health care needs in the capital, and a complete moratorium on mental health bed closures with a locality by locality quality audit.

On issues closer to home for nurses, Labour is committed to full implementation of nurse prescribing. It also says it will introduce some form of free parking scheme for community nurses. It wants nurses on the staff to be represented on trust boards.

Parliament sits this week, as some sense of normality returns to the political process. But the next five years will be a roller coaster for the new Labour government. Nurses will be hoping that issues they care deeply about, particularly inequality and poverty, will be pushed up the political agenda. This will be the first time Labour has had a chance to prove itself to most nurses.

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NURSING STANDARD 1