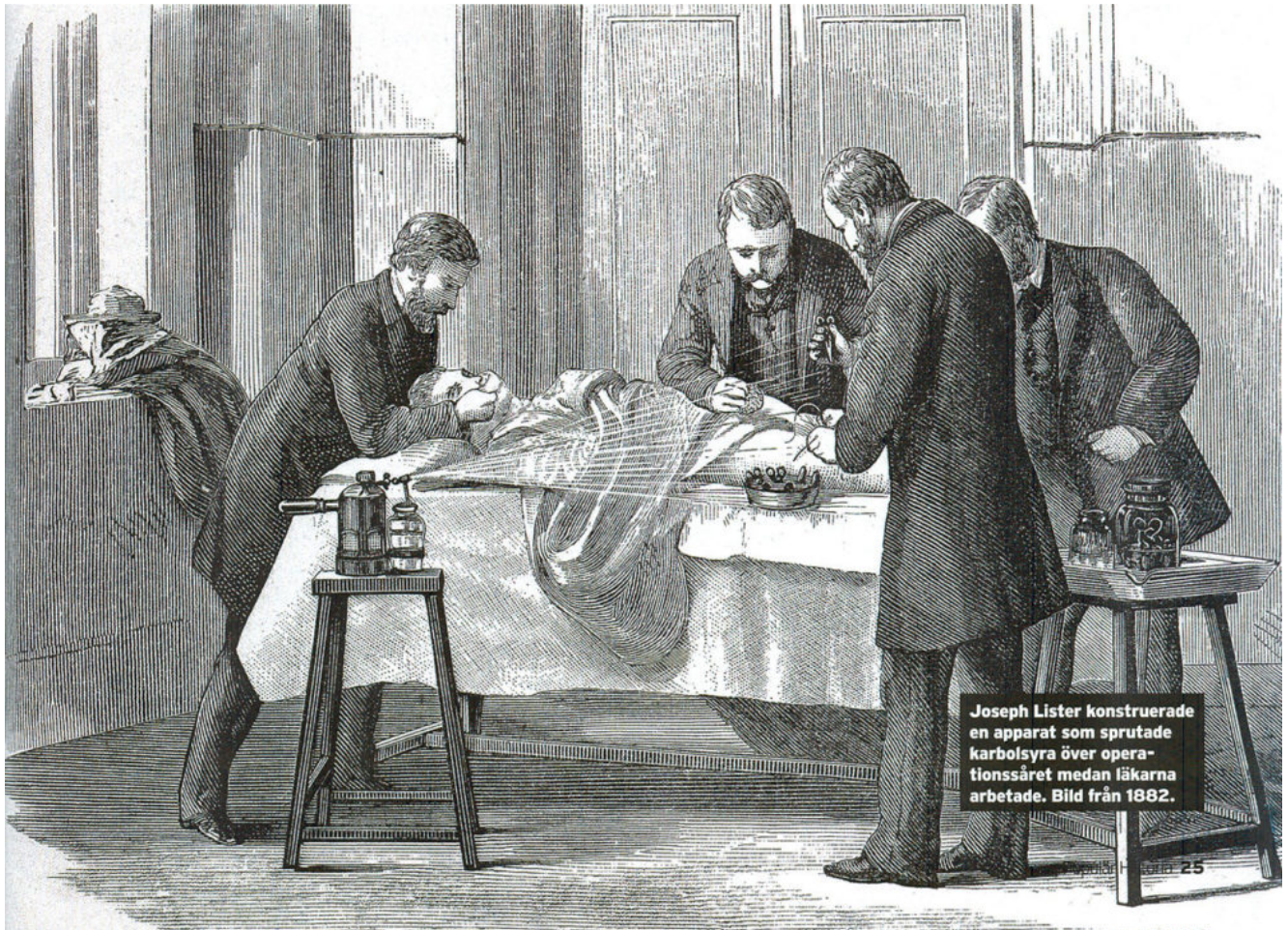


Letter from Scotland

When Joseph Lister pioneered antiseptic medicine at Glasgow and Edinburgh universities in the late 1800s I wonder if he had any idea how many lives he would save?

And would he have believed that there would eventually be a national health service for everyone, free at the point of delivery. And would he ever have imagined that such a health service would be a major talking point in a general election campaign?

As the parties launched their manifestos this week, it became clear that this election is not only about Brexit and Scottish independence. It's also about the health service and the environment. And it's about the end of "austerity" with all parties promising to spend, spend, spend.



Saving the health service: Lister spraying antiseptic phenol (carbolic acid) over a patient in 1882.

On health, Labour plans to spend an extra £143bn over the next five years, the Conservatives £140bn and the Lib Dems fit neatly into the middle with a promise of £142bn. In each case about 10 percent would come to Scotland in the form of an increase in the general grant given by Westminster to the Scottish Government to be used as it sees fit.

The problem for the SNP in all this is that it will feel obliged to spend all that money on health too, even though health already takes up 42 per cent of the Scottish government's entire budget. So popular has health spending become that there's no room in the campaign to ask questions about the limits of health treatment or even where all the money is to come from.

Nevertheless, the extra funds will be welcomed in Scotland because this week, we've been reminded yet again of the immediate strain the NHS is under. The health secretary Jeane Freeman has had to set up a public inquiry into infection scares at two newly built children's wards in hospitals in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and she is under constant pressure over staff shortages and the failure to meet waiting-time targets.

Nicola Sturgeon told a party rally in Dundee on Wednesday that the NHS was under threat from a Boris Johnson government. Brexit, she claimed, would not only mean less money for all public services in future but the ending of free movement from other EU countries would lead to staff shortages in hospitals and care homes. And, like Labour, she accused the Tories of opening up the NHS to privatisation in trade deals with foreign countries.

In the first big TV debate of the campaign, Boris Johnson repeatedly told Jeremy Corbyn that "the NHS is not for sale". It would always remain free at the point of delivery.

And on Scottish independence, he went on to claim that Labour had made a deal with the SNP to grant them a second referendum in exchange for their support for a Labour government. Something that Jeremy Corbyn denied. For her part, Nicola Sturgeon has said a second Scottish independence referendum would be an essential condition of SNP support and she has since added other conditions, notably more powers for the Scottish parliament and the removal of Trident nuclear weapons from Scotland.

So campaigning goes on, with a stunt a day from the party leaders and some quiet leafleting and canvassing in marginal constituencies up and down the country. The weather was cold earlier in the week – minus 10C in Breemar – but has since become simply dark and “dreich”. Incidentally, “dreich” has come top of a list of favourite Scottish words in an on-line poll by the Scottish Book Trust. “glaikit” came next, followed by “scunnered” and “shuggle”, then “wheest” and “fankle”. It’s strange how they could all be used to describe the election campaign.

Finally, a large bear has appeared on the streets of Dunbar. No, it’s not part of a re-wilding programme, at least not directly. It’s a five metre high steel statue in honour of the environmentalist John Muir who left Dunbar 1849 at the age of 11 and went on to found the national parks movement in the United States. It’s been made by the Kelpies sculptor Andy Scott who has depicted the bear standing on his hind legs sniffing the air and leaving the question hanging – does he smell danger or is that the sweet scent of a land flowing with milk and honey?

