

# “Foundation Hospitals will kill the NHS”

Alastair Darling has the cheek of old Nick. Foundation hospitals, he tells us are “a new Form of public ownership” and “local democracy”. He is trying to pull the wool over our eyes. When PFI was initially launched by Blair's government we were told, don't worry it won't affect medical services. Since then the government has signed a “concordat” with the private sector. This was supposedly a measure to take advantage of empty private sector beds in the face of an NHS beds crisis. But we were told: “The concordat” is intended to be the start not the end of a more constructive relationship.”

Then we heard that the new diagnostic centres would be built and run by private health care providers. The government has now invited international private health providers, including some of the most disreputable of US companies to put in their bids.

The NHS was founded to provide universal health care, free at the point of delivery. What the government is now introducing is *competition* between different health trusts and the *private sector*. This is what they mean by “a mixed economy”.

Foundation hospitals will not only be able to borrow private money, they will be able to form companies with the private sector. Since they will be able to keep any profits, inevitably they will tend to decide (using “local autonomy”) what activities they can carry out and what ones they cannot.

Milburn says there will be a 'core' service, but outside of that, Foundation hospitals will be able to dump some activities, forcing patients to look elsewhere.

All this is posed in terms of “patient choice”. But a sick person does not want to choose a hospital. They want to be able to be treated in their locality, not have to travel long distances.

The government in “rewarding success” will create a situation where more money goes to the Trusts with more resources. Just as “parent choice” has led to the enriching of some schools and the impoverishment of others, we will be faced with “sink hospitals” just like “sink schools”. This “competition” will not drive up “performance” but will lead, like all markets, to the creation of winners and losers.

The government's measure of “success” is crude and does not take account of social conditions in the hospital catchment areas. It poses as the supporter of “local autonomy” yet they will hold onto the power to impose private companies on “failing hospitals”.

Far from reintroducing “market discipline” the NHS needs to be freed from competition. Instead of opening up healthcare to big business to make a fast buck, we want a *national* health service which strives to remove regional inequalities. In contrast the government's policy will worsen inequalities in provision of service.

The NHS, despite its weaknesses, gave us a glimpse of a society in which wealth did not determine whether or not you received health care as it did before the Second World War. Its main weakness lay in the compromise with the medical hierarchy which meant that there was no democracy within the system. Staff were neither consulted nor did they have any control. Add to that the fact that the service has been drained for years by the profiteering drug companies, and now profits are being squeezed out of the service by way of PFI.

In defending Milburn's proposals on Foundation hospitals, the reverend Blair made an interesting analogy. He said that the Labour Party had made a big mistake by opposing the sell off of Council Housing, and it must not make the same mistake today.

So the selling off of Council Houses has been a big success? It has been a social disaster for working people. Individuals may have made a fast buck, as houses were given away incredibly cheap. But as a result of privatisation there developed a terrible shortage of affordable housing, which the private sector will not provide. Young people especially cannot afford the grossly inflated housing prices.

Blair says Labour “lost contact with the aspirations of its supporters”. This was not true. So cheap were these houses offered that it appeared more expensive to pay the rent than to buy the property. But the Labour Party was the product of working people organising for their *collective* interests. It is no more 'natural' for people to want to own a home than it is for them to want 'choice' in health provision.

Blair and his cronies have fallen in love with 'the market' and they want to introduce it to the NHS. The Prime Minister seems to like

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All things American. Yet a cursory glance at health care in the USA, where the market is king, shows private companies earning big fortunes at the expense of the population, where health insurance is very expensive. And more than 40 million people are left without health insurance.

Those who support the NHS as *collective provision* need to campaign against the government's privatisation agenda. Foundation hospitals are just the latest step to the introduction of the profit motive into health care. The government is destroying the service introduced by Labour after the Second World War. What is required is co-operation rather than competition and a democracy of service providers and users.

For too long the trade union leaders compromised with the Blair government. They accepted the “concordat” as a short term measure when it was nothing of the sort. It is now clear that the government is destroying the health service. The unions have condemned Foundation hospitals but what will they do to try, to block these proposals? They left their members to resist PFI isolated in their locality. What is clearly needed is to prepare the ground for *national action to challenge the government's agenda.* Could the unions not help to create, with the help of service users, and all those who want to defend the NHS, a Health equivalent of the Defend Council Housing Campaign, which has successfully united tenants and Council workers?

As Allyson Pollock has written in the Guardian: “Foundation hospitals will kill the NHS.” It is necessary to respond will all due haste and seriousness, not just words.

Read Allyson Pollock on Foundation hospitals and PFI at: [www.ucl.ac.uk/spp/about/health\\_policy/new.php](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/spp/about/health_policy/new.php)