

## **NHS: Is it worth defending?**

**BARACK OBAMA'S** sterling efforts in the fight to extend health insurance to all in the United States has led to bizarre attacks on the British National Health Service. Prominent Republicans, insurance industry lobbyists, shock jocks and pundits of all kinds, along with a large number of national and local organizations, have raised fears about everything from the "socialist" tendencies taking root in the White House, to involuntary euthanasia and abortion.

American conservatives are spreading lies and rumours about Britain's state healthcare system in the struggle to sink public healthcare reform at home. Not simply is Britain's healthcare system "socialist", it is actually "evil"; it is evil because when it is not killing babies in the womb, it is killing the elderly outright (or refusing them life-saving treatment). All these horrors await decent hardworking Americans if they are foolish enough to allow the Federal government to use their tax dollars to provide health insurance for everybody.

The reaction of most British people to all this is swift and unequivocal: "I'd rather be ill in Britain than in the States". This is because we all know that people with insecure or low wage jobs in America simply do not have health insurance. We know also that the onset of serious or chronic illness can easily bankrupt most Americans. Of course, British people grumble about the quality of the service they get, but they're not going to be told that its rubbish by a load of ill-informed foreigners, particularly not Americans.

The NHS is loved and hated in almost equal measure by most people in Britain. People love it because medical treatment is free when you need it – you can rely on it – you don't have to make costly or special arrangements – it's always there in

emergencies or with the onset of chronic illness – *just for the asking*.

Alternatively, they hate it because it's big and impersonal, you often have to wait for treatment, hospitals are often poorly run, and many have a scruffy and dismal aspect. It's sometimes difficult to get to see your doctor, and when you do, they are often too busy to give you much time or consideration. Yet, most British people love the NHS, they simply can't imagine life without it.

This is why almost all politicians, including the Prime Minister and his wife, have been twittering in defence of the British health system: "the NHS is simply the best" they tweet, in the certain knowledge that most people will agree with them. Loving the NHS is an article of faith in Britain, it is sacrosanct, it might be criticized and derided, but its existence must not be questioned or threatened. It has a status similar to the monarchy: most British people hate the Royal Family, but love the Queen. They can't imagine life without her, but they'll jeer heartily at her numerous freeloading relatives.

British politicians know that they have to negotiate the nuances of this love-hate relationship between their constituents and the NHS with great care. They dare not argue that it is adequate or fit for purpose – this would bring down charges of complacency upon their heads – and yet threatening its existence would stop their political career in its tracks. Consequently, the entire debate concerning the future of our health system has to be framed as "improvement", "reform" and the introduction of "patient choice".

This is why British Conservatives are compelled to conceal their hatred of the state delivery of healthcare. This is why Tory leaders struggle to stay in step with the national mood by *finessing* their plans and covering up their fundamental opposition to the National Health Service. But the truth is that, unlike their American counterparts, they are not opposed, in principle, to universal health insurance. What they want to do is break up the NHS by introducing

privately run hospitals and clinics into the system; they want charitable institutions, state hospitals and other not-for-profit providers, *and* ordinary commercial companies, to compete with each other to meet healthcare needs funded by a universal insurance scheme. In this way they would seek to break the power of the trade unions in the NHS, they would save some money, and they would make it easier for middle and upper class families to buy extra and better healthcare services within the context of a national, state-sponsored system.

Fundamentally, they want to make it easier for the prosperous and well-to-do to buy better services by paying to “top-up” the state provision with private insurance and savings, while retaining a basic free-at-the-time-of-need system for the rest of the population. They want to do this by introducing a multiplicity of different providers into the healthcare system, which would enable the introduction of a multiplicity of different payment regimes, and a multiplicity of different employers to undermine national trade union organization. This is all being advanced under the camouflage of widening “patient choice” – “Who” the Tories reason, “could be against choice?”

There is an understandable suspicion and visceral hatred of such plans in Britain. The reason for this is to be found in the fear that if we break up the National Health Service we would find ourselves back in the period before the Second World War, when there were posh private services for the wealthy, and uncertain, discretionary, and charitable treatment for the rest. The underlying value of the NHS is that treatment is a *right not a favour*; most people do not want to risk giving up their *entitlement* in return for *charity* laid on by the Tories. The fear is, that by introducing widespread private provision, the *entitlement* of those relying on state insurance would be steadily eroded.

The Labour Party’s response, and that of the left more generally, is to sing the praises of the NHS to the roof: the nurses are angels, the porters and cleaners are paragons of virtue, the hard-pressed junior doctors

are. . .well, hard pressed; the surgeons and anaesthetists are regular miracle workers, and all-in-all our NHS is “the envy of the world”. The fact that no country on earth has bothered to emulate our excellent and unmatched system is quietly ignored – it is after all, unmatched.

The truth is that the NHS is a pretty lousy system. Of course, it’s better than the American set-up, but it’s not better than the health system in France or in thirteen or fourteen other rich countries. In Australia, for example, they consistently achieve better outcomes while providing more or less universal cover delivered by a variety of different providers.

The NHS was set up on the cheap in 1948, and it has been run on the cheap ever since. What is more, the provision of a complete health service “free at the point of need” has been steadily eroded since the Labour Party introduced charges for prescribed medicines in 1951. In the last few years NHS dentists have become as rare as hen’s teeth; British people routinely pay for private dental treatment, for private opticians, private chiropody, and there can be no doubt that this creeping privatisation of provision will continue to spread as people are forced to plug the gaps in NHS provision by making their own private arrangements.

There is not an honest political divide in Britain between left and right: while those to the left of Labour are more concerned with defending the wages and conditions of healthcare workers than, they are with the quality of healthcare, Labour ministers are introducing private providers of hospitals and clinics, and of laboratory and screening services, into the NHS mix.

Plainly, we need all sides to come clean and explicit about their objectives and intentions. We need a discussion about healthcare in Britain just as far-reaching and searching as the one taking place in America. The NHS is a crappy model and should be replaced with a system that guarantees *universal* and *comprehensive* quality healthcare for all.