The fruits of our Labour? Resisting health and education privatisation in the UK


Last week’s speech by UK Shadow Education Secretary Stephen Twigg raised alarm bells amongst both education and health campaigners. On the eve of the People’s Assembly [3] and Labour’s Policy Forum, two successful anti-privatisation activists ask, are attempts to ‘reclaim’ the UK Labour Party diverting people from more effective local resistance?

There is no lack of things to write angrily about, and neither is there a lack of effective strategies against such policies.

And yet what the UK has instead is a disconnected political and media class pontificating about the “palpable disbelief” among even those attending Labour Party events “at the assertion that Miliband will make it to Downing Street”. Speculating about whether the UK Labour leader’s personality, history and apparent (lack of) strategy make this more or less likely. These commentators seem utterly removed from the realities of everyday life for the working class (‘ordinary people’ if you prefer a euphemism). Such speculation attracts more media interest than the crucial questions - what strategies can resist the rapid outsourcing/privatisation of every element of social welfare? The increasingly authoritarian, centralised control, the marketization and commodification of everything possible? The drastic reduction of wages and conditions of workers, proletarianisation of the entire workforce, and the immiseration of the lives of the unemployed and, well, everyone who didn’t inherit land and/or go to public school?

So - what are we going to do? Whilst the Labour Party still enjoys the support of many in the UK, we see little evidence that campaigning under their umbrella is an effective strategy. Our analysis of Stephen Twigg’s recent speech on education (cleared by the party hierarchy, remember) suggests that those who care about public services - from education to health - should think about dropping the hopeful belief [5] that Labour policy makers can be convinced or that the party can be pulled leftward from within (or even from without [6]).

Twigg’s speech [7] was full of wonkish convoluted formulations, such as "Networked schools in a networked world." But behind the media spin lie lightly masked - and deeply worrying - assumptions. It seems that in education – and we suspect, in health too – it will not be Labour that effectively challenges and resists government policies in these key areas. It will be down to grassroots campaigners.

For National Health Service campaigners, this sentence in Twigg’s speech is particularly resonant: "It is not feasible, nor is it desirable, for thousands of schools to be accountable only to the Secretary of State".

This seems strangely inconsistent - didn’t Labour’s shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham argue against the provision to remove NHS accountability from the Secretary of State in the Health and Social Care Act?

Are schools different from hospitals? Or does this suggest that Labour will not in fact repeal this or other key aspects of last year’s hugely controversial Health & Social Care Act [8]?
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Twigg also said:

"A school should not have to change its status to earn the permission to innovate...if a freedom is afforded to an academy and it drives up standards, that freedom should be available to all schools".

Twigg knows that Labour cannot get away with promoting the wholesale school privatisation policy of their Tory counterparts (free schools). What they are prepared to do is to apply market pressure to schools nominally in public ownership/control by extending competition between schools, removing national agreements (potentially even on teachers pay) and enabling dodgy ‘partnerships’ with the private sector. In short “We won’t privatise, but we will effectively privatise”.

For those who grew up and were politicised under the last British Labour government (Peter was 12 in May 1997, being born the same mythical and momentous year as Owen Jones - 1984), this about sums the Party up. While seemingly privatising at a slower speed than the Conservatives, what Labour are able to do for national and international capital is deliver marketization, which makes privatisation possible and, it seems, inevitable.

Both Eds (Miliband and Balls) have recently been banging the erroneous ‘there’s no money left’ drum. That means (more) PFI contracts to build desperately needed schools/hospitals. It means handing over the management of schools and parts of our health service to private companies to profit from the mythical idea that this will ‘save money’. Of course in both cases, privatisation inevitably costs more because of the need to pay dividends to shareholders. Railways offer a vision [9] of our future NHS, while NHS PFI will cost us at least £300bn [10]. Even not-for-dividend organisations add on huge costs [11] associated with commissioning, management consultants, fragmentation, lawyers and marketing.

The Labour line boils down to incentivising ‘innovation’ through competition. Where have we heard this before? It sounds remarkably like the Tory line on health services. And what do we know it really means? Cuts to staff numbers [12], access and quality [13], terms and conditions [14], and outsourcing of anything that can be outsourced [15] without attracting negative media attention.

"Academies can choose to buy in tailored support that better meets their needs, so should maintained schools...We’ll give all schools, not just some, the option to shop around"

This sounds to our ears like “Vote Labour for back door privatisation, because that’s much nicer than upfront privatisation, isn’t it?” Thanks, but no thanks.

"I pay tribute to the excellent work of many chains, like ARK and United Learning"

Even our party political broadcasts are now sponsored! Let’s remember [16] that “Over 200 parliamentarians [who] have recent past or present financial links to companies involved in healthcare”. This list includes 1 in 6 Labour peers, not to mention former parliamentarians David Miliband [17], Alan Milburn [18], and Patricia Hewitt [19], among others.

"There will be no bias for or against a school type"

That sounds remarkably like the current government’s line that there will be no bias for or against any kind of provider (private or otherwise) in the NHS. We feel this is Labour admitting that all the NHS privatisation that happens between now and 2015 is AOK with them, and they aren’t going to do anything about it if they ever get elected.

"The comprehensive ideal, within a mixed economy of schools."

But the public no more want a ‘mixed economy’ of schools, than they do a ‘mixed economy’ of health providers. We wonder if a Labour health secretary will be saying in May 2015 “The NHS ideal, within a mixed economy of healthcare providers.” Despite the fact that three quarters [20] of the population [21] (or more [22]) don’t want more private provision in the NHS.

The overall impression is that Labour education policy is that of a US-style shopping mall. And if it's
good enough for education, perhaps it will be good enough for the NHS?

If Stephen Twigg’s speech was genuinely about improving education it would have been very different, and not the Gove-lite we heard at the RSA.

“He says look to Finland... Well let's do that.”

Yes, let's: in Finland there is no competition between schools, there are no league tables, no inspectorate, no streaming, no private schools, and no standardised testing. In short there is no marketisation of education. Teachers are qualified to Masters level (post-graduate education is free in Finland). Finland does not buy in to the myth of parent choice (which is marketisation by another name). Finnish children simply go the nearest school to their home: no entry tests, no pretending you’ve caught religion, no slight-of-hand with the address you use on the school application form.

So why don’t Labour make similar plans for our education system? It appears that just like the blue team, the red team are believers in the power of the market, and that many of their policy prescriptions facilitate privatisation.

Breaking a service into pieces is a key step towards privatisation. Doing so destroys nationally agreed terms and conditions and immediately brings down the wage (and future pensions) bill – the biggest outgoing of any public service, where humans can’t be replaced by technology quite so easily. This makes the public service more profitable for private corporations. Broken up services are then exposed to companies who can swoop in and pick up the juiciest bits - ‘cherry-picking’.

Another step towards privatisation is to promote the myth that that schools and healthworkers are terribly restricted and need ‘freedom’ in order to thrive. What the ‘restrictions’ challenged usually do is safeguard working conditions for staff, and ensure that students and patients aren’t subject to crackpot ideas that simply aren’t fit-for-purpose. Getting rid of such restrictions seems mainly to open up a market for endless new ideas - new curricula materials, health management consultants, and much more of highly dubious benefit.

We know there are people with good hearts doing excellent work as members of the Labour Party, or whilst being members. However, many more members are clinging to membership and the election in 2015 as our ‘only hope’ (the words of Owen Jones). This is hugely frustrating, and increasingly makes us actually angry. How can these policies and politicians be supported?

We urge people not to focus their energy on ‘reclaiming’ Labour, but to turn their skills, time and energy to more useful things that might actually make a difference to these issues. That might actually improve their lives and the lives of their friends, neighbours, colleagues and children. Let’s get on with fighting and resisting these policies whichever party is behind them, with dogged determination, digging out the scandals, doing our own media and publicity work. If we are successful, you can bet the Labour Party will start shifting as it seeks votes – but this should be an unintended consequence of our activity, not its central goal.

For those who doubt that successful campaigns can be fought without a Labour Party lead, we would highlight two victories we have been involved in.

In education, Ealing saw a months-long campaign supported by the whole Petts Hill School community which eventually saw off the threat of academy conversion. It wasn’t easy but a strong community campaign can triumph if it brings as many voices and groups together as possible. Groups like the Anti-Academies Alliance can offer support and advice.

In health, Peter was involved in a campaign which mobilised when told that their local hospitals and community health services were going to be outsourced to a so-called ‘social enterprise’ (under guidance introduced by the previous Labour government). Locals were sceptical of the policy, but more sceptical of our ability to do anything about it. But, after two years of hard slog, we won. Gloucestershire Care Services (our community hospitals, health clinics, and a raft of county-wide services from podiatry to wheelchairs) is still a publicly-owned, publicly-accountable body, not a private company hiding behind the NHS logo. We also fought off attempts to run a
tender process that could have seen local services delivered by the likes of Virgin (as they are in Surrey [30]) or Serco (as they are in Cornwall [31]), for instance.

Were Labour Party members involved? Of course. Was the Labour Party, or leadership, helpful in any way? Not really. In fact, some local party members were distinctly unhelpful. They certainly weren’t essential to the success of the campaign, which instead relied on the hard work of a small but dedicated group and a Judicial Review made possible by legal aid and Leigh Day and Co. solicitors (currently taking on Hunt himself [32] in Lewisham). Campaigners put in hours leafleting, putting up posters, public meetings with national campaigners like Keep Our NHS Public [33] and local campaigners, Freedom of Information requests [34], press releases, tweeting, and several protests [35] from the large [36] to the small [37] and direct. This activity was primarily conducted by the local anti-cuts groups: Stroud Against the Cuts [38], Cheltenham and Gloucester Against Cuts [39] and Forest of Dean Against Cuts [40], with support from the local Green Party and Socialist Party, and, yes, the local Labour Party.

Our guiding principle must be: what will work? What will prevent provision being taken away from people, and ensure access is available to all? What will prevent profiteers sucking money out of the provision of public services? What will make life easier for those at the sharp end, particularly: the unemployed, those living with disabilities, those living with mental health problems, women, people of colour, the working class…? Let’s admit that we do not give two hoots which shade the people selling us snake-oil are, and get on with the tiring, hard, but often fun and rewarding work of mutual aid and solidarity – the work that not only defends the conditions and freedoms won for us by previous generations [41], but helps build a better world for those that come after us.

Topics: Democracy and government

About the authors

Peter Pannier is a member of Docs Not Cops [42] a group of NHS staff and patients who believe no one should be afraid to access healthcare as a basic human right, and that NHS workers should not be forced to police the people they treat.

Subjects

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