

HEALTH SERVICE IN DANGER

"The National Health Service is under attack" (*In Defence of the NHS*, 1977, opening paragraph). How prophetic those words have turned out to be. The government's policy on controlling public expenditure is having dramatic effects, and the N.H.S., despite Thatcher's claims to the contrary, has been savaged. An era has ended. I am a child of the N.H.S. We have the same age and so I have a particular attachment to it. To me it is as British as chip butties and Watney's beer. The public expenditure cuts mark the end of an era in Britain in which both parties accepted an obligation to steadily improve and expand our health services even if the resources provided were always far short of what was required. And let's be clear about it, both the Labour and Conservative parties are responsible for cuts in the N.H.S. Under the impact of world depression both parties seem to be trying to turn back the clock. As David Widgery puts it, "There is a new social philosophy in the air: the welfare services, it is now agreed, are not really in existence to help human need, to heal the sick, to develop the imaginations of the young, to ease the loneliness of the old. In fact they are in existence to discourage people using them." (*Health in Danger*, 1979, Macmillan). (In this context we should note the rise in social security staff employed to discover scroungers at a time when all other sectors of public employment are shrinking).

We have seen beds lost, wards closed, units run down and hospitals closed. Yet it is claimed that the current public expenditure cuts will have no detrimental effect on the service provided by the N.H.S. The argument used by the government to justify this claim revolves around the idea that since the N.H.S. is a very large organisation with a corresponding

large number of 'administrators', there *must* be a lot of 'waste' which could be eliminated. This should produce a saving in finance. The service can be made more efficient (i.e. cheaper), the argument runs, by imposing cash-limits. These are arbitrary amounts that the Government believes should cover the cost of an adequate National Health Service, thereby eliminating waste since there will be no extra money to pay for it. It seems that the evidence for this 'waste' in the N.H.S. rests mainly on Conservative dogma regarding human nature. "People are naturally wasteful with services that are *free*." Now a nation whose standard of living is declining is very likely to accept any argument that might decrease income tax, so Margaret Thatcher's promise to cut income taxes was obviously very attractive to the electorate. Especially since the electorate could believe that the cuts in public expenditure were mainly to eradicate waste without affecting services.

To anyone working in the N.H.S., however, cash-limits imply a restriction on their ability to supply a health service to the community. The idea that the short-fall of funds imposed by cash-limits can be absorbed by eliminating waste is laughable. It is particularly ironic that the main burden of cash-limits is likely to fall upon the administrators since it is their job essentially to facilitate the smooth running of the N.H.S. and to control over-spending by over-enthusiastic medics and others. An insidious effect of this financial attack on the N.H.S. is now appearing. Morale is slowly sinking amongst N.H.S. workers as they come to recognise more and more often that the service they are able to offer is second-best because funds are not available.

In view of the Conservative government's position of strength what are the chances for a sustained and effective strategy of opposition to the

cuts? By and large the Labour Party has been rendered ineffective by the disarray in its own ranks. Nor are the Trades Unions united in their opposition. Union action has almost always taken place at local level and is, except for the Fightback campaign, uncoordinated and therefore easily dismissed. The health professions themselves seem to be divided in their reaction to the attack on the services they provided. The opportunity for united opposition has apparently been lost in the scramble for better pay, better conditions of service and for control of the scarce funds that remain. So what have we to offer?

Aneurin Bevan himself accepted the inevitability of defects in any National Health Service but identified the crucial position it takes up in the social fabric of Britain. "Doubtless other defects can be found and further improvements made. What emerges, however, in the final count, is the massive contribution the British Health Service makes to the equipment of a civilized society. It has now become a part of the texture of our national life. No political party would survive that tried to destroy it." (*In Place of Fear*, 1952, MacGibbon & Kee).

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