

Leamington *Spark*^{#2}

In this issue (5th Dec 2003), the Spark lights a fire about...Plaskitt's push for markets in the NHS...water fluoridation...speed-freaks and bulldozer joyriding...local anti-war activity...more on care homes closures. Plus! Entertainment listings. Can you spot how many times James Plaskitt MP appears in this issue?

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Local MP opens door to destruction of NHS

Leamington citizens committed to defending the core, egalitarian principles of the NHS (National Health Service) have been shocked to learn that, according to the November 14th edition of national newspaper *The Guardian*, James Plaskitt MP has recently written to the prime minister asking for a 'foundation trust' to be established in this constituency. This follows hot on the heels of the disturbing revelation that Warwickshire healthcare representatives have been overseas studying the operation of the privatised US healthcare system, a system notorious for its inability to extend secure health coverage to the poorest 20% of its population.

Foundations...of a health market

Foundation trusts, commonly referred to as 'foundation hospitals', are the government's latest controversial attempt to inject market principles into the NHS. The central idea is that foundation hospitals will remain within the NHS but will have a greater degree of autonomy (i.e. financial freedom) from central government. This, proponents argue, will



Nye Bevan, visionary father of the NHS. *"Blairite market dogma and careerist, spineless local MPs are threatening the very foundations of the NHS"*, he would probably say if he was alive today...

extend make such hospitals more responsive to the needs of local people and extend 'consumer choice' whilst safeguarding the public-service principles of the NHS.

However, beyond the rhetoric, foundation hospitals turn the traditional NHS ethos of collective system-wide improvement on its head, replacing it with a damaging, divisive market model in which 'survival of the fittest' competition between hospitals is encouraged and hospitals behave increasingly like businesses. Many fear

that, as a consequence of their newfound financial freedoms, foundation hospitals will be able to prosper at the expense of other hospitals, by (for example) using independent pay scales to 'poach' experienced staff from nearby hospitals.

The thin end of the wedge

One particularly acute fear is that this will condemn poorly-performing hospitals to further demoralisation, with the burden falling on a working-class that is not accustomed to 'shopping around' to the same extent as the middle-class. This is, indeed, a very legitimate concern. However, it is only part of the picture, because the fundamental issue is not foundation hospitals versus non-foundation hospitals; in many respects this is a red herring because the government eventually hopes to extend foundation status to all hospitals. Rather, the issue is that competition will inevitably encourage hospitals to shift investment towards cost-effective areas of treatment at the expense of more expensive areas, potentially dealing a serious blow to the principle that healthcare provision be determined by social as opposed to financial criteria, and introducing what will (in the longer-term) be a potentially irresistible tension towards private user charges and regressive, insurance-based payment schemes.

"It's all part of the drive to break up our public health service, and feed the profitable bits to the global big business sharks," said 'Ian', a trades-union activist with the UNISON union, and a hospital ancillary worker in Coventry. The public share Ian's scepticism about foundation hospitals; a recent UNISON poll showed that, in contrast to the dog-eat-dog foundation model, 84% of the public want to see collective, system-wide improvements in the NHS.

The shape of things to come

Plaskitt and other supporters of the foundation hospital model will no doubt

crow about the government's raft of safeguards to constrain the worst excesses of the market. But these are no more than cynical, ornamental solutions designed to appease half-hearted critics whilst leaving intact the fundamental, liberalising thrust of the reforms.

Indeed, we might argue that the foundation hospital reforms are the precursor to the emergence of a fully-fledged domestic healthcare market, which (through consolidation and the natural desire to achieve economies of scale) will, over the longer-term, inevitably be integrated into a global healthcare market, perhaps dominated by the very same revenue-obsessed healthcare businesses that our Warwickshire officials have been studying in recent weeks.

Alternative visions

Nobody is pretending the NHS is perfect, of course. However, New Labour's reforms are profoundly dangerous because they propagate the lie that increased accountability only flows from more markets and privatisation. Indeed, there is absolutely no need to throw the re-distributive, egalitarian core of the NHS out in the search for greater democratic accountability. For example, the Democratic Health Network (DHN) has recently released a paper, *"People Power and Health: A Green Paper on Democratising the NHS"* which rejects the 'market democracy' of foundation hospitals and sets out an alternative, more egalitarian vision for NHS renewal.

More generally the medical profession, trade unions, local government and user groups are coming to realise that impressive, socialist public service renewal is best attained not through market models, but by truly unleashing the experience and expertise of these stakeholders. See, for example, Hilary Wainwright's new book, *"Reclaim The State: Experiments in Popular Democracy"* (Verso Books.)

And finally, a challenge...

The Spark would be delighted to hear from James Plaskitt, and in particular how he can justify undermining the NHS

through his support for foundation hospitals. We await your reply, James!

- Visit the Spark website for a link to the 'Plaskitt' Guardian article...



Fresh fluoride furore

"Drinking fluoride to prevent cavities is like swallowing bandages to cure a broken arm." The Ecologist magazine

It may surprise readers who live in Leamington or Warwick to discover that they are part of the 11% of the country being forced to drink fluoride, a registered poison, every time they have a glass of tapwater. Fluoridation is the addition to drinking water of chemicals based on the element fluoride, which many believe protects the teeth of children.

Fluoride...unpleasant stuff

Fluoride has been linked to cot death, eczema, Alzheimer's, thyroid problems, infertility and arthritis. Doctors from the National Cancer Institute and National Health Federation in the US have also blamed it for 35,000 cancer deaths each year. Fluoride is the active ingredient in most pesticides, and the chemicals used to fluoridate drinking water, silicofluorides, are a toxic waste product from the phosphate fertiliser industry. As such, they are unprocessed hazardous waste containing many toxic substances not present in pharmaceutical grade fluoride, such as arsenic, mercury and lead.

Fluoride is used in most toothpastes to strengthen the teeth and prevent tooth decay, but is present only in small doses and is not intended to be swallowed; indeed, Procter & Gamble have admitted that a small tube of their Colgate toothpaste *"theoretically...contains enough fluoride to kill a small child."*

Forcing it down our throats

All this comes at a time when the House of Commons has just passed a bill to allow 'health' authorities to force water companies to fluoridate their water whether they or their customers like it or not – something the industry had previously been reluctant to do for fear of being sued. This bill was, of course, supported by Leamington and Warwick's obsequious Blairite MP James Plastic – hardly surprising considering New Labour's close relationship with the chemical industry which will now be able to sell off even more of its poisonous waste products at the public's expense as fluoridation is enforced across the country.

Outrage

As the parliamentary motion brought the issue into the public consciousness, many local residents were outraged to discover that our water has been fluoridated for years. Judy Steele, of Radford Semele said she was *"extremely worried"* at the health implications, adding, *"my children were brought up in an area where the water was not fluoridated, and never had any fillings whatsoever. They also had no fluoride toothpaste or fluoride drops. The secret of healthy teeth is a sugar-free or low-sugar diet from the beginning so you don't develop a sweet tooth."*

Ruth Ramos, a Leamington resident, told the Spark, *"As a sufferer from an under-active thyroid I know the consequences of consuming too much fluoride – it can interfere with the function of the thyroid gland, leading to many problems such as weight gain, depression and fertility. We are already consuming far too much from products such as toothpaste and tea so why contaminate our water as well?"* Ruth's particular problem should come as no surprise to the government – up until the 1950s European doctors prescribed

fluoride to reduce the activity of the thyroid gland for people suffering from an over-active thyroid. Hypothyroidism (an under-active thyroid) is now one of the most common medical problems in the US, where much of the drinking water is fluoridated.

Find out more!

- Local meeting on fluoridation, Sunday 14th December, CAW, 2pm. (See listings.)
- National Pure Water Association website – www.nwpa.freeserve.co.uk
- Thyroid UK website – www.thyroiduk.org
- Leamington Green Party are campaigning against fluoridation locally and nationally and can be contacted at 01926 427773.

Local MP stands up against care home closures...NOT!

Comment Piece

Most local people can clearly see the importance of care for the elderly. They can also recognise that it is a matter that should be dealt with as far as possible with a great deal of care and attention. So when care homes were closed on Lillington Road, Kenilworth Road and Warwick New Road this year, causing the loss of 84 care places, there was understandable concern in Warwickshire. Here is a national issue, which has had a clear impact on our community.

Sadly for us, it is less of a concern to our elected representatives. Leamington and Warwick MP James Plaskitt apparently

found that he could not agree to a Commons Motion on Care homes. The motion argued that *"This House condemns the Government's failure to address the crisis facing care homes for the elderly, which has resulted in the closure of a large number of care homes"*. Our Member of Parliament apparently finds this statement to be untrue, in spite of mounting criticism back in his constituency of the government's failure to provide adequate care.

Strong motion, not supported

Furthermore, he was unwilling to *"call on the Government to recognise the damaging effects of this crisis in care on the most vulnerable members of society and swiftly and decisively to end the suffering, disruption and distress that is being caused to the elderly by the Government's policies"*, in spite of being more than aware of the damage that government policies were doing to the lives of the people who voted him into his nice Westminster office.

The motion was eventually reworded by the House of Commons (in its own peculiarly childish way) to reflect the views of its Labour majority, to the extent that the House *"recognises Government action to provide real choice for older people in long term care and to place a greater emphasis on users and patients in the design and delivery of services"* and *"welcomes the Government's strategy for modernising social care services through unprecedented real terms increases in resources"*. As astute Leamingtonians will be aware, this reflects the situation of local residents in no way, shape or form.

Same old story...

This is what we have come to expect from the self-serving Blairite James Plaskitt, always happy to put party before constituents, although in this instance it was a particularly blatant betrayal of their concerns and needs. When questioned upon his unpleasant disregard for the Leamington elderly, Plaskitt clung to his old friend 'market forces', claiming that Care Homes needed to close for financial reasons and that it was beyond his control. I would suggest that when the

lives of the vulnerable and elderly are at stake, it should be the policy of any responsible government to intervene, regardless of the pressures of the market.



MPs like Plaskitt will continue to undermine their local constituencies so long as their loyalty is to political party first and voters second. What possible motivation does he have to serve the people when their only alternative option is another equally self-serving politician whose first priority is finding his way up the ladder of government? Plaskitt is so divorced from life in Leamington that he sees the suffering of our elderly as something on which he can look the other way and ignore, along with the other 319 apologists for this abject lack of support.

There will be a full update on the local care homes issue in the next issue of the Spark.

Eyewitness Iraq

Arab-American Ramzi Kysia lived through the USuk 'Shock and Awe' attack on the people of Baghdad in March this year.

On Sunday 24th November, at Dale Street Methodist Church Hall, Ramzi told an audience of interested Midlanders, from as far afield as Tamworth, something of their ordeal.

Murderous

Ramzi is an activist full-time member of Voices In The Wilderness, an organisation of mainly Americans, set up to build citizens-to-citizens bridges with Iraqis. Also, to publicise the realities behind official and media lying, they defied

repeatedly the murderous 'UN' - actually USuk -driven - sanctions by running food and medicines into Iraq.

Ramzi called the occupiers "completely incompetent" in restarting the basic necessities of civil life for Iraqis. Electricity and water supplies are still patchy and erratic months after the invasion, and have been so right through the intense heat of summer. (The occupiers in their fortified enclaves, of course, enjoy extensive privileges the Iraqi people can at this moment only dream of.) The phone system remains destroyed. Police services barely exist, leading to widespread violent lawlessness. Hospital services remain in crisis.

Outreach

Ramzi urged local people to get involved in making links with suffering ordinary Iraqis, and to do what we can to help them. Details of outreach schemes in the pipeline can be obtained from Stop The War Coalition branch meetings; the next will be Sun January 4th (7 PM) at the Dale Street Methodist building, side entrance.



Only days earlier, Central London was immobilised by another huge (350,000+) demo against the occupation on Thursday 20th November. Leamington sent numerous people via coach and train to what turned out to be one of the biggest UK midweek demos ever. (A fine complement to the Feb 15 demonstration, the biggest in UK history.) A giant statue of Bush was toppled in Trafalgar Square.

In Brief

Jumbo Dodgems, Ratrún Skidpans

(20th November.) Hotwire kids recently played dodgems with giant earthshifters at Itchington's derelict cement works. Fencing and trees were ripped out. A Landrover was crushed flat.

Only the vast and still-profitable clay-pits now function at the site. The works have been abandoned by the cement company, who seem in no hurry to accept the commercially unprofitable work of demolition and land restoration. The clay is now sent to Rugby. The ghost works host a few small businesses using odd buildings. Otherwise they stand empty, attracting dirt-bikers and dodgem artists.

Wheel artist

Another such 'wheel-artist' lost it on Leam Terrace East this weekend. Rat-runners between Willes and Radford roads often cut through this quiet residential road at speeds up to 60mph, past dozens of playing children. This young baseball-cap hit the blind bend so fast, he went right across the road in a four-wheel drift, ending up facing back the way he came. No children were killed - this time!

December 10th is the National Day of Action on Traffic Speed - see <http://www.transport2000.org.uk>.

Community Control

Community activists in both places reckon that genuine grassroots participatory democracy could cure the kind of problems described in the previous two stories, by allowing local people to take active control, but say: "Don't hold your breath for central government to make this happen."

Listings

Thursday 4th to Saturday 6th December - Playbox Theatre presents "The Duchess of Malfi", Cox's Yard, Stratford, tickets £9.50 or £7 concs - "both a thriller and a horror story and is given the full Jacobean treatment with dumb shows, masque and candlelight". Phone (01926) 419555.

Saturday 6th December - Romany Pie, Warwickshire County Council Staff Club, Northgate Road, Warwick, 7.30pm, tickets £7.50 with buffet or £4 without. English, Irish and Scottish folk music - all proceeds in aid of Dementia & Alzheimer's Warwickshire Network (DAWN). Phone (01926) 613685.

Monday 8th December - The Re-Offenders + special guests, Kelly's Bar, Leamington, tickets £2. Local band plays classic punk including covers of The Clash, The Stranglers etc. www.reoffenders.com

Saturday 13th December - Xmas Fayre in aid of animal welfare, Community Arts Workshop, Avenue Road, Leamington, 2pm.

Saturday 13th December - Vanilla House Band, Leamington Sub Aqua Club, Adelaide Road, Leamington, 8.30pm, tickets £4. The duo play Hot Club, Gypsy jazz, Latin, Klezmer, Flamenco, Rumba, Bluegrass and thrash metal! Phone (01926) 770031.

Sunday 14th December - Talk on fluoridation of water in Warwickshire by Pat Rattigan, Community Arts Workshop (CAW), 2pm. Phone (01926) 888333.

Wednesday 17th December - Vanilla House Band, Star & Garter, Warwick Street, Leamington, 8pm, free. The duo play Hot Club, Gypsy jazz, Latin, Klezmer, Flamenco, Rumba, Bluegrass and thrash metal! Phone (01926) 770031

Friday 19th December - Loco Mundo, St Patrick's Irish Club, Leamington, 8pm, tickets £5. Latin jazz, funk, world music for dancing. Phone (01926) 739950, www.locomundo.co.uk

The Spark will return in the New Year!

We are always looking for article contributors, story ideas, distributors, donations, etc. Don't be a stranger! And here's a festive thought for you...

RESISTANCE! WHO, if not US? WHEN, if not NOW? WHERE, if not HERE?