

Socialist Renewal - fifth series: 3

BOOK REVIEW

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New Labour's Attack on Public Services by Dexter Whitfield

Review by Paul Walker

The public cost of public service marketisation so far is estimated as £8.4bn of one-off expenditure and £3.6bn per annum is recurrent expenditure.

When we cast our votes for Labour in May 1997 many of us expected the neo-liberal policies of the Tory years, including the marketisation of the NHS, and other public services, to be reversed. The figures tell a different story. But is it possible that under Gordon Brown Labour will return to its roots and ditch marketisation?

The answer is almost certainly not unless it is forced to do so by a wider supported and well organised campaign led by the public sector unions and organisations like Keep Our NHS Public. Of course the public sector, including the NHS, does need to be reformed - but its public service ethos is worth preserving and the gift economy of healthcare must be protected from the usury of the for-profit sector.

But neither the public sector unions nor KONP have articulated an alternative future for the NHS and other public services. Helpfully, Dexter Whitfield sets out such a vision here, based on nine pillars:

1. A restatement of public service principles and values
2. Democratic accountability and transparency including a revitalisation and empowerment of local government
3. Integration of strategic policy making and service provision with the abolition of the commissioning/outsourcing agenda
4. Long term planning for social needs
5. Better integration of local, regional and nation public bodies
6. Equality, social justice and sustainable development to be mainstream
7. Integrated impact assessment of policies, programmes and projects
8. Increased capacity of local and central government and public bodies, drastically reducing the use of management consultants
9. Better skilled workforce, with education, training and learning, workforce development and good quality pensions

Clearly a draft agenda for KONP and the anti-market brigade.