

DAY 1: Jarrow to Chester le Street

On way now; had a great send off in Jarrow this morning with drummers and just arrived in Chester le Street. Stayed with Mavis (we used to work together in South Tyneside) and Donald last night, and she drove me around South Tyneside before the march – strange coming back after over 15 years. Ingham House which used to house the Gateshead and South Tyneside Health Authority is now a housing estate and the Marsden Rock –the famous seaside landmark - has lost its arch. So, times really have changed.

And they certainly have changed for the NHS, as speaker after speaker at the start of the march today pointed out – passionate speeches expressing great upset with the current state of the NHS with large scale and rapid marketisation, and more importantly frustration with the political process whereby the Government has managed to force through changes: “there was no mandate for the NHS changes, and if anything the people were told no more top down reorganisation of the NHS”!

So, they came out in droves, with dogs, pushing prams and in wheelchairs marching to save the NHS. Flummoxed the organisers who were not expecting to see so many of them giving up time at the weekend! As Vinny McHugh, 22 said “The NHS is the most important thing the country has done. You cannot let it be taken away without fighting” – so has left his job to march. A view echoed by Peter Chater, another young person and scientist who was marching for friends and family. It was heartening to see that it was not just ‘oldies’ like me – it was the young and the old joined by the common mission, and everyone wanting to do their best as a thank you to past generations who had handed us this cherished institution and as a duty to safeguard it for the future generations.

It was quite clear that the Coalition is not popular with this lot, and the Prime Minister personally caught a lot of ‘flak’, with accusations of crony capitalism. But surprisingly (or not) some people did question whether the alternative, Labour, could be trusted completely either. As Dr Helen Groom, my ‘old’ colleague, a GP back again in Gateshead, reminded me that when she was in Oxford many years ago there was the plan to outsource all of commissioning! She came to serve tea to us because “people need to understand what is happening to the NHS, and they need to stand up for the NHS”.

This was a mature crowd today, recognising the political and economic reality and not wanting to be used for short term populist advantages. They are in for the long haul, and deeply committed to the NHS. That is not the same as saying that there is clarity about what is needed; that will hopefully happen over the next 3 weeks, but there are signs that extreme positions: no closures at all or Labour is the saviour will be challenged. Just as there is recognition that money alone is not the answer, it needs to be coupled with reform.

All in all, a great start. Good humoured albeit serious discussions continued over dinner with the recognition that we needed to stay strong, not become ‘bitter’, find ways of informing and empowering people, and influence the policy makers.

Walking was made much more enjoyable as met up with many interesting people and especially Richard Thomson, Prof of Public Health, and my fellow public health trainee in 1988 when we both joined the training scheme and enrolled for our Masters in Community Medicine at the University of Newcastle.

Good exercise and brilliant dinner from the Chester le Street Methodist Church will ensure good night's sleep even though it is a long time I slept in a hall on the floor! But I guess compared to the original Jarrow marchers my hardship is minimal.

Rajan Madhok

16 August 2014

DECLARATION: I am walking in personal capacity and the views expressed are mine alone, and are meant to inform not criticise or insult. If you like them, tell others and if you do not, tell me- just kidding, but do help me with my prejudices/arrogance. I may be old but can still learn.

Blogs available at www.leadershipforhealth.com



With Helen Groom, Wendy Broderick, Mavis Gill and Richard Thomson