

Day 19: Bedford to Luton

Alyson Pollock's Reinstatement paper is now out and argues for abolishing competition and the purchaser: provider split, reestablishing public bodies and public accountability, and restricting the role of commercial companies. It draws on some of the best examples of NHS administration over its history, and suddenly I am transported to pre-Thatcher reforms NHS. I joined public health training in 1988, just before 'Working for Patients' and the introduction of internal markets, and this was the time of the district health authorities and FPCs and the whole system overseen by regional health authorities, and between the CHCs and boards consisting of local people (and mostly unpaid) there was community ownership. Of course there was rivalry and inequalities and I remember Newcastle getting the bigger slice of 'cake' compared to Teesside (where I was training), for example, but on the whole that system was a lot better than what we have ended up with. Indeed, I have often wondered if we had stuck to those principles and just kept those structures overall we would have been much better off, financially and in human costs terms. I am intuitively drawn to Alyson's model – so Back to the Future then.

But this will require a major restructuring of the NHS – having lived through far too many reorganisations I can understand the reluctance to embark on another one but equally I cannot see how one can be avoided. The current organisation – a change so big that it could be seen from the space – is not fit for (any, except causing chaos) purpose. But who will put the Humpty-Dumpty together again? I have not heard much commitment to the structural changes from the Labour party people so far, although there is talk of integration and repealing of the H & SC Act.

Anyway, Alyson has set the ball rolling and there will be more analyses and proposals in the next few months- 246 days to the NHS referendum as the next election were described by a speaker on our march today. Another great day today, with many interesting conversations.

It was good to meet and talk to Dr Nick Johnson, a paediatrician from Hinchingsbrooke Hospital and a prospective Labour Party candidate. I find out more about the pediatric services in the region and according to Nick it will be interesting to see how Bedford will cope this winter. Working under a private sector management (Circle) obviously is not for everyone and I understood that some people (clinicians) did leave, and although there have been demonstrable aesthetic improvements and Circle is good at reputation management, the Hospital has had to rely on government subsidy. Not sure if the model can be replicated across the NHS without massive costs.

It was also good to meet Natalie Bennett, the leader of Green Party, and talk about political reforms. Proportional representation offers a way but there does not seem to be much support for it and we are stuck with our current first past the post system, which means that it may be a while before we see the necessary disruptive change in our political system. I am very disheartened with the failure of our democracy with very little accountability and hope that a) more people will vote and b) hold their local elected representatives accountable – at least it will be a start.

The day started well with a great send off outside Bedford Hospital, with a packed lunch provided, and some friends came to see me off. I used the visit to Bedford to catch up with my BAPIO colleagues, and also with Vijay Gautam who has relocated to India from the NHS and was in the UK for a visit, and is keen to develop Indo;UK collaborations on health. The march went well, much of the time in contemplation and listening to Brian's harmonica – I like it and harmonica reminds me of western films with cowboys and deserts and moons!

We arrived to a great rally in Luton, and speaker after speaker tore into the Coalition Government, with phrases like noses in the trough (given the numbers of MPs and Peers with health care companies business connections) and the crowds cheer to the calls of keep your filthy hands off the NHS. I can see that the NHS is going to be a major issue for the 2015 elections. Be interesting to see how many NHS staff stand for elections – and from which platforms/parties.

The large numbers of BME people in Luton as we walked through the streets was notable; and it was sad to hear comments about keeping immigrants out from some people who came to heckle us, including a very irate motorist who made some rude gestures too – the influence of EDL is still there obviously.

We are staying the night at Bury Park Community Centre and am back on the floor after the luxury last night- but it should be OK. I am getting used to my fellow marchers ;-). Only 3 more nights, I think I will miss them when the march ends. There is already talk of what next – to be continued.....



Vijay Gautam



Nick Johnson



Natalie Bennett



Brian with harmonica

Rajan Madhok

3 September 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