

PRESS RELEASE



News from Keep Our NHS Public campaign www.keepournhspublic.com

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New health secretary Alan Johnson must act on concerns he expressed in the deputy leadership campaign

Alan Johnson, the newly appointed health secretary, must act on the concerns he expressed about NHS policy during the deputy leadership contest if he is to be more successful than his predecessor, according to the Keep Our NHS Public campaign.

In a joint Keep Our NHS Public / Red Pepper magazine survey, conducted in the midst of the deputy leadership contest, Johnson **was cautious about the role of the private sector in the NHS** – the defining feature of the Blair / Hewitt era. He warned that Labour “has a responsibility to monitor the success of its changes, and if outsourced services do not perform, we must act.”

He also linked the issue of private involvement with the NHS debt difficulties, a connection that Patricia Hewitt would never concede. He said: “I know that many people have closely associated the trust debt difficulties with the outsourcing of services, and Labour must take care to treat the root of the problems.”

In another break from the Blair / Hewitt orthodoxy, Johnson issued a rebuff on the key policy of choice, seeing it as a secondary issue rather than the driver of change: “Choice will only be valued if a good choice is on offer,” he said. “The quality of healthcare per se is most important to the public, so the government must maintain its concentration on healthcare standards primarily.” He cautioned that “choice will only help to raise standards in the NHS if it is on offer to everyone, not just the well informed.”

On staffing, Johnson accepted that “the pace of change has been dizzying and frustrating for some”, and said staff “deserve a greater say in what those changes should be”.

He also ruled out the possibility of further charges for NHS services, an idea that became fashionable towards the end of the Blair era after being proposed by Charles Clarke. Johnson said: “The NHS must be free at the point of use wherever fiscally possible.”

Labour’s deputy leadership election revealed deep unease within the party over the direction that NHS market reform has taken under Tony Blair, with harsh criticism from the likes of Harriet Harman, Peter Hain and John Cruddas reflecting the dissatisfaction of Labour members and unionists.

Harriet Harman, now chair of the Labour Party and tipped to be Leader of the House, attacked the controversial independent sector treatment centre (ISTCs) programme – the privately run facilities performing NHS operations. Harman said it was “clear” that the centres “have not always proved to be more efficient or innovative than NHS-run elective centres”

Alex Nunns of Keep Our NHS Public said: “We welcome the appointment of Alan Johnson as health secretary and we hope he acts to address the concerns that he expressed while campaigning to be deputy leader. He is right to say that Labour must get to the root of the problems on health. The anger of patients and staff cannot be assuaged by slick presentation. It stems from the cavalier market reforms and widespread closures that the government has imposed.”

Alan Johnson’s full response is available on the website of Keep Our NHS Public:
<http://www.keepournhspublic.com/pdf/DeputyNHSJohnson.pdf>

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