

Who's behind Reform and Doctors for Reform?

Reform

Think-tank Reform is one of the new breed of parliamentary/corporate hybrid lobby groups, backed by the chief executives of major corporations, with ready access to the corridors of power. It bills itself as an "independent and strictly non-party think tank whose mission is to set out a better way to reform public services and economic prosperity". It believes that "by liberalizing the public sector, breaking monopoly and extending choice", high quality services can be made available to everyone.

Originally set up by a Conservative MP and a Tory strategist, the membership of Reform's Advisory Board points to its funding: chief executives, chairmen and directors of major pharmaceutical companies, global investment banks, and accountancy firms. These include Sir Christopher Ghent, chief executive of GlaxoSmithKline plc and non-executive director of Lehman Brothers Bank; Oliver Pawle, vice-chairman of UBS Investment Bank; Derek Scott, a consultant to KPMG and former adviser to Tony Blair; and Jeremy Sillem, former Chairman of Bear Sterns International (the European arm of a US investment bank). The Board also contains Frank Field, former minister for welfare reform, and, more importantly, Sir Steve Robson, ex-arch-privateer from HM Treasury - extremely influential in pushing the PFI programme. The Advisory Council, meanwhile, includes the CBI's Dr Adrian Bull, MD of Carillion Health, a major player in the PFI hospitals market and in the independent sector treatment centre program.

Reform's published reports tend to be short on evidence but long on recommendations, which invariably favour further marketisation of the NHS and greater involvement of private companies. A recent Reform report claimed that Government policies would result in a 10% reduction in the NHS workforce, and that this would be a good thing, without providing any calculations or reasoning.

Doctors for Reform

Doctors for Reform is a group of doctors "supported" by Reform. They profess commitment to the values of the NHS while periodically calling for its replacement by a social insurance system with patient charges and more private provision.

When Doctors for Reform first announced itself in 2004, it could muster only 400 signatures for its policy prescription. Two years later it has gained just 400 new recruits and still can't boast even one percent of the NHS medical workforce, which under the BMA (representing over 130,000 doctors) remains firmly against the health market and the costly social insurance model.

One of the lead signatories and spokesmen for the group is cancer consultant Dr Maurice Slevin, who sits on the Doctors for Reform steering committee. When speaking for Doctors for Reform Slevin is never slow to declare his NHS credentials. But in 2003 he wrote a controversial pamphlet, "Resuscitating the NHS", for the right wing Thatcherite think-tank the Centre for Policy Studies. Then, Slevin was happy to emphasise his involvement in private practice, unfavourably contrasting the

care and regime in NHS hospitals with what he terms a “large” private hospital in central London – which turned out to have a mere 138 beds.

In spring 2006 Doctors for Reform sent a letter to party leaders calling for a review of the way the NHS is funded that would consider moving to a social insurance model. This old debate has been had countless times. Consistently the conclusion has been that a healthcare system funded by general taxation is not only the most equitable system but also the most efficient. This was the view of the Wanless report in 2002 and has long been the position of the Treasury. Both say that moving to an insurance system would greatly increase administration costs, removing money from patient care. Buried deep on Doctors for Reform’s website is an admission that they have not been able to find any evidence to the contrary.