

Diane Abbott speech to STP Conference

*Health Campaigns Together
Carrs Lane Church Centre, Birmingham
Saturday 17 September 2016*

‘You’ve heard some brilliant speeches this morning, and I just wanted to say a little bit in conclusion. First of all I wanted to tell you how proud I am as the Shadow Secretary of State for Health under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. My mother came to this country in the 1960s as a pupil nurse. She was one of that generation of women from overseas who helped build the NHS. And when people tell you that immigration is somehow a net drain on our social services I would ask you to remember my mother’s generation.

‘I was on the front bench as a junior minister to Andy Burnham when the 2012 NHS Act¹ went through. We fought it, but we weren’t able to stop it. The thing that struck me, in a year of campaigning, was that the 2012 NHS Act was not any destination. It was a stop along the way to the long-desired outcome for some, not all but some, people in the Conservative party: an increasingly fragmented National Health Service. A health service that was no longer genuinely national, and a health service that would ultimately be easier to privatise. This is the context in which we must see the STPs. It seems to me they are the next step on the road the Conservative party has gone down. They are, if you like, death by management consultant.

‘Let me just be clear. They are a good idea in principle. It must be right that health stakeholders both in the NHS and local government work together on issues like public health. Many of you will remember the reports on public health which pointed out that actually the minority of spending which affects our health is actually NHS spending. What we spend on houses, what we spend on education, what you spend on schools are what actually contribute to overall health outcomes. It must be right that we bring the stakeholders together but we have to look at the real world context.

‘The real world context, as you have heard, is not just a clear intent - for some people, not all, in the Conservative party – to move towards privatised healthcare, but above all the context is the systematic under-funding of the NHS and a funding gap of at least £22 billion. And where do they think they are going to find this money? From so-called “efficiency savings” – as if you haven’t squeezed NHS staff above and beyond already, before these STPs.

‘Sadly, although the notion of more change and transformation and sustainability are good ideas in principle, the reality of the STPs is that they are a vehicle for cuts and configuration. That is why they have had to hold their plans in private. They wanted to be able spring these STPs on the public and make them look like a managerial device: “we have to look to the future”. But it’s not a managerial device. It’s a political device to make cuts which politicians are nervous about fronting up. The other problem is secrecy. If you write to ask for the minutes of the meetings, many STP committee minutes are not available.

‘On Wednesday [[13 September], on the debate on STPs, I asked – and some of these Tory MPs seemed quite resentful – to talk about what the reality of what these STPs meant. So it’s the secrecy. It’s the lack of involvement of the communities on the ground floor of this so-called sustainability and transformation, as you have heard. Two Tory MPs got up and said “you know, it’s not going to make it easier to deliver this stuff if you’re not involved”. I said “If these sustainability

¹ Health and Social Care Act 2012.

and transformation plans are so good for the patient and work for the NHS, why are they keeping them so secret?”.

‘The other aspect, which is clear from any of the plans that have leaked, is that they are an attempt to re-visit hospital closures and re-configurations which people have been campaigning against in some cases for years. Even the BMA and the Royal Colleges have said that one of the problems of the STPs is the concentration on hospital closures when they certainly don’t improve the service and it’s not even clear they will save money. So in London we have proposals to re-configure the Charing Cross Hospital, attempts to drive this through again with the STPs.

‘Another aspect of the STPs is the consequences for staff and the cuts in staff. We’re just in the middle of a junior doctors’ dispute. The reason the dispute has got so bitter is partly because Jeremy Hunt chose to impose the contract. How can you improve relations with any organisation by imposing a contract? But it’s also that he’s trying to make staff do more with the same money. He can’t even fund a 5-day NHS: so how could Jeremy Hunt imagine that with no more money you can have a 7-day NHS? So there’s an issue about the effect on the staff and there’s an issue about some of their money-saving wheezes that you will read about in some of these plans.

‘They talk about “apps for obesity”, they talk about people having their consultations on site rather than going to their GPs, they talk about going on line. That sounds fine. But we know that 90% of the money spent on the NHS is spent on elderly, and how do they seriously expect older people to manage their health using “apps” and Skype and going on line?

‘Any of you who have interviewed the public just a little will know that when someone sits down and tries to talk to you, it’s in the last minute of the conversation they blurt out what they are really worried about, what the problem really is. How will ordinary people manage with consultations online? Because they will not have the opportunity to relax and say what is really bothering them. We are already a country with poor outcomes for cancer. Part of the reason for the poor outcomes for cancer is late presentation and late diagnosis. If we are going to replace meetings with GPs or consultants with Skype, how on earth can that improve earlier presentation for cancer and anything else?

‘We’ve heard about the importance of a broad-based campaign. I absolutely support that. That is the way to go. In parts of the country where you have no Labour MP or very few, you have to have a broad base of people to get them. I’ve spoken about the wish to privatise in some parts of the Tory party, but I think ordinary voters do not want to see our NHS decimated. So broad-based campaigning is the answer. We are going to have to go toe to toe with the NHS bureaucrats on these STPs.

‘Let me just say this about the Labour Party. I told you right at the beginning, I am a nurse’s daughter. What I am saying to you is this: as long as I have anything to do with health campaigning in the Labour Party, and as long as Jeremy Corbyn has anything to do with it, we will be standing for the workers, we will be standing with communities, we will call the Tories out as often as we can.

‘I said, just before we broke up for the party conferences, that I believe the STPs are going to be the driving force of the decimation of our health service. So I am saying to you, working with non-political organisations is absolutely fine, but this is a campaign against these STPs as a proxy for cuts and re-configurations. That we will be fighting against in parliament, week by week, month by month and I look forward to seeing some of you around the country as the campaign goes on.

‘Thank you very much.’

[1300 words]