

Britain: Government plans further fund cuts in elderly care

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Last month Labour's Health Secretary Andy Burnham outlined the government's proposals for elderly care in the green paper, "Shaping the Future of Care Together".

In truth there is to be little care. Though Burnham claimed that people living longer was something to celebrate, his proposals are symptomatic of Labour's contempt for the social needs of the broad mass of the population, and its most vulnerable sections in particular.

"More of us are living longer—life expectancy is going up and advances in medical science mean that people with a disability are living longer", Burnham said. "This is worth celebrating but does mean we need to radically change the way care is provided and paid for", he warned.

The government's plans will only aggravate the already deteriorating situation faced by elderly people.

Labour has ruled out fully state-funded provision. Instead it proposes:

- A so-called "partnership" approach, in which the government and the individual in need share the costs of provision, with the state paying between a quarter and one-third for those on a low income.
- An optional insurance-based model, which would also see the government paying between a quarter and a third of the costs, but would allow individuals to pay £20,000 to £25,000 to cover themselves against the remaining costs of care.
- A compulsory state insurance scheme under which everyone who can afford it pays between £17,000 and £20,000—and receives free care in return.

These proposals are to cover only the cost of care provision. Those residing in elderly care homes will have to pay for their accommodation, which is almost a

half of the total bill.

People living in England are regarded as fully able to meet the cost of their care if they are found to have more than £23,500 in capital (£22,500 in Wales)—the combined value of all the savings, stock and shares, and their house value. Many people are compelled to sell their homes or spend all their lifetime earnings to pay for the cost of their care. This is despite the fact that it is often substandard, as much is subordinated to the profit interests of private nursing and care home owners.

Care home owners charge an average of £470 a week (£24,500 a year). The figures are much higher for nursing care, at £664 a week from each resident. These charges vary by almost 50 percent across the UK. Nearly 40 percent of the UK's 420,000 care home residents have to pay their own way, because they fail the means-tested criteria for local authority help. Local councils are also under pressure to cut costs and the amount each council is ready to pay varies in the UK.

The government claims that its proposals are "fair, simple and affordable for everyone". In reality people are struggling to pay their fuel bills, council tax and even their food bills. A recent report on Fuel Poverty revealed that 4 million households in Britain and 5 million households in the UK are in fuel poverty and struggling to pay for the electricity and gas they consume. Fifty percent of them are pensioners (14 percent of pensioners live on less than £5,000 a year).

The government's green paper claims that there is not enough money in the system to pay for the care people will need in the future. "If we want to meet the needs of all those who require care in the future then, as a society, we are going to need to pay more for care and support. The question is where this additional money is going to come from", Burnham said.

Its proposals are designed to make clear that it has no intention of raising revenues from the super-rich that have accumulated a mammoth proportion of Britain's total wealth from the pockets of the ordinary masses.

In Britain, 1 percent of the population own 23 percent of all wealth and 62 percent of total liquid assets, while the poorest half of the population own just 6 percent of wealth and less than 1 percent of liquid assets. It is calculated that Britain's 54 billionaires pay hardly any tax on their wealth, with more than 32 of them not having paid a penny in personal taxation.

Burnham admitted in his speech that people have to sell their homes and spend their earnings to pay for their old age care. This is despite former Prime Minister Tony Blair declaring to the Labour Party conference in 1997 that he did not want a country where "the only way pensioners can get long-term care is by selling their home. Where people who fought to keep this country free are now faced every winter with the struggle for survival, scrimping and saving, cold, alone, waiting for death to take them".

Understandably, Conservatives do not have any serious opposition for the proposals and criticise the government of taking a long time to address the question. Tory health spokesman Andrew Lansley said, "If the government were serious about finding a consensus on long-term care, then they would long ago have consulted on costed proposals".

In addition, there are numerous reports of residents being abused under the system of profit-making, privately-owned care homes. Most of these homes are understaffed and lack fully trained staff. Those employed in this sector are being subjected to appalling work conditions on meagre salaries.

Recent inquiries into serious failure of health and social care practice revealed the dire inadequacies festering in the system. Organisations that have been founded to keep social care standards have shown their impotence in curbing the abuses taking place in nursing and care homes. Funding cuts and official indifference to care have cost many lives in both public and private care sectors.

It was following the election of the Thatcher Conservative government in 1979 that the wholesale privatisation of care homes began. Now, nearly 90 percent of care homes are privately run, leaving residents with dementia, disabilities and the frail

elderly subject to market constraints.

The Labour government is now planning to slash all that remains of welfare reforms won by the working class struggles after the Second World War, while it spends billions on bailing out the banking system.



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