

Public services that can be improved.

This is my latest Conservative Home article:

When I go shopping I do not set out to maximise what I spend. If I tell friends and family I do not report that I have bought £70 of goods only to face a barrage of complaints that I had not spent £80 instead. I go to the shops with a list of things I need. I compare prices and qualities. I might tell them what I have bought. I might only mention what I paid if I had found some bargains or been given a good offer.

Nor when I go to the shops do I need to ask how much the shop has spent on providing its service, in order to go to the one that has spent the most. I go to the shops that combine a good environment, friendly and prompt service and value for money goods. I would not regard it as a defence for poor service or shoddy products if the shop told me they had nonetheless spent a lot on delivering this. Nor would I take pity if they told me the experience was rubbish because their owner had left them short of cash to spend on staff and stock.

So why then when daily I listen to the government and Opposition hammering at each other over important public services, do they spend most of their time talking about costs? The NHS must be great says the government, because we have just spent £20bn more on it. That is not enough thunders the Opposition. It would be perfect if we just spent a bit more. Ministers rarely give us any detail over where all the extra money is going, and the Opposition rarely tell us what extra items or staff they would want to hire. It is unusual to hear a normal debate about the quality and range of service, its availability, and how these could in detail be improved. Money is national and political. Service provision is local and outside politics. The detail of why a service is poor is apparently too difficult or too embarrassing for politicians to discuss.

The government should change this pointless debate. They should tell us what improvements to service and what increase in service they are going to buy, and tell us how they will seek to achieve better value for money. They may need to incentivise public sector staff to align their interests with the consumer interest. Ministers may need to change the odd Chief Executive of whom the public sector has so many to ensure better performance. Senior managers should report openly their successes and failures and encourage grown up understanding of what needs doing to improve. As we approach a debate on strengthening our nation's defences we should not debate how much money we should spend. We should debate what extra capabilities we need and then set about providing them to the right quality for an affordable price. The danger is monopoly provision gives too much power to the professional providers and not enough to the consumers. We have a monopoly nationalised road network. The users pay many times its cost through special taxes on owning and using a road vehicle. Highways England and many Council Highways departments seem to delight in closing roads or parts of roads as often as possible. They allow utility companies access to dig them up and put in cables and pipes in ways guaranteed to create many future needs to close the highway and dig it up again. Why not place these networks in reinforced conduits for ease of access and why not put more of them away from the centre of a main road? They often keep parts of the roads closed at evenings and

week-ends when no-one is working on the closed portions. There is no sense that the user taxpayers have any right to expect the road to be more freely available more often. Many Councils regularly change the signs, paintings, lanes, junctions and crossings in ways which make the life of the car commuter or business van driver ever more difficult

Last week I went to speak in far away city by train. The fairly new rains were a lot less comfortable than the old ones they replaced. There was no hot meal service even though I was travelling at meal times. The computer system telling you where your seat was did not work. Overall it was a bad and expensive service. Train services are now hugely subsidised so they should think more about how to make themselves more attractive to the users. The collapse of office working post covid is in part a large revolt of the commuter against train services they regard as both bad in quality and too dear. Too many commuters have been let down by cancelled and delayed trains, by a shortage of seats and by season tickets going through the roof. The wrong kind of snow, leaves on the line and the late running of the train ahead pall as reasons for delayed arrivals.

Public services like health and education that are free at the point of use have plenty of demand which they struggle to meet. Public services like trains and buses with user charges struggle to fill their seats. The public sector is reluctant to close services and facilities that lack users and finds it difficult to keep up with demand where free offers help make a service very popular. Recent years have brought a passion to take the management of many of these services out of politics by delegating the use and control of resources and the recruitment and training of staff to expert managers. Labour and Conservative Ministers favoured this, thinking it meant they would not be to blame when things went wrong. Instead the Minister is still blamed for every failing, whilst the management usually escapes criticism and may even keep their well paid jobs despite some disaster. Parliament concentrates on playing party politics, where the Opposition blames every management failing on too little money, and the government claims they had enough all along. No wonder the services often cost a lot and do not deliver the quality and range we want. We want an NHS free at the point of use and free places for all needing them in schools. We need better ways to debate successes and failures, with more attention on how the money is spent. Ministers who provide the cash need more control over how it is spent all the time they are held responsible.