

LIFE AND DEATH Iona Heath

“Nothing is too good for ordinary people”

The private finance initiative has betrayed the ambitions of the pioneers of the welfare state

On 29 January 2009 the board of NHS Islington decided to sell off Finsbury Health Centre. This iconic building has been in continuous public ownership and health service use since it opened in 1938. The decision to sell is symptomatic of the prevailing disregard for history in contemporary society and illustrates all too clearly the negative implications of many strands of current policy, including the private finance initiative, the lack of clarity about local and national responsibilities, and the hypocrisies of “public consultation.” Finsbury Health Centre is a grade 1 listed building and its architectural significance is recognised nationally and internationally. It was commissioned by the Labour controlled Finsbury Borough Council and inspired by Dr Chuni Lal Katial, a first generation Indian immigrant who was then chairman of the Council’s Public Health Committee. It was designed by the immigrant Russian architect Berthold Lubetkin, whose approach was uncompromisingly modern and technically innovative. Lubetkin recognised that health services would necessarily change over time and so flexibility was built into a design that has been vindicated by the continuous provision of a huge range of health services to the local inner city population for more than 70 years. In 1938 services included a tuberculosis clinic, a cleansing and disinfection station, a mortuary, a solarium for children with rickets, a dental clinic, a foot clinic, and a dispensary. Today they still include podiatry and dentistry services but also two general practices, speech and language therapy, health visitors, physiotherapy, and thalassaemia and sickle cell services.

The creation of Finsbury Health Centre anticipated by 10 years that of the National Health Service and, throughout its history, the health centre has reflected the original aspiration to provide the highest

standards of health care for ordinary people. It is essential to the history of 20th century architecture, provides a powerful illustration of the contribution of immigrant communities to the social fabric of the nation, and models the political forces that were to lead to the creation of the NHS. In 1943 Winston Churchill suppressed a now famous poster designed by the great graphic designer Abram Games. The poster showed the new Finsbury Health Centre superimposed on a picture of an undernourished child with rickets playing in a derelict building. The slogan was “Your Britain—Fight for it Now.” The vehemence of Churchill’s reaction to the poster suggests that he was already aware of the rising tide of social solidarity that was to deliver a Labour government in the immediate post-war elections and put him out of office despite his wartime success. The greatest achievement of that post-war government was the inauguration of the NHS in 1948.

NHS Islington is the “operating name” adopted by Islington Primary Care Trust in December 2008. The website reports that the name was changed so that “you can understand more about what we do and how we can help you” and goes on to claim that “we will be working ever-more closely with local communities and individuals to understand current and emerging local health and care needs and to make sure that we can engage more effectively with you.” The gap between rhetoric and reality is staggering. The report of NHS Islington’s board meeting on 29 January says that the decision to sell off Finsbury Health Centre followed a “comprehensive public consultation”—New Labour’s familiar figleaf of legitimacy. The consultation document provided a completely one sided introduction to the challenges posed by such an important building and then simply gave options about where services could be relocated. At no point was the public asked whether



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or not they wished the health centre to remain within the NHS and to continue to provide local health services.

The 19th century polymath William Morris wrote in the founding manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877: “Stave off decay by daily care.” Anyone who has worked in NHS buildings knows that such daily care is in short supply, and that this situation has worsened since maintenance services were contracted out. The beautiful Finsbury Health Centre is now in urgent need of repair but the misguided imperatives of the ill conceived private finance initiative mean that the cost will burden NHS Islington with an ongoing and unaffordable debt. The financing of the infrastructure of public services has become a scandal that history will not absolve. Alternative strategies are still possible but NHS Islington rejected them, and the only extenuating argument is that the local health service in a relatively deprived inner London borough should not be expected to shoulder the whole responsibility for a building of national and international importance.

At the opening of Finsbury Health Centre in 1938, Berthold Lubetkin said, “Nothing is too good for ordinary people.” Seventy years later this wonderful ambition has been comprehensively betrayed by the decision to sell the building into private ownership. In his book *Errata*, the scholar George Steiner writes: “In late capitalism, money bellows. It packages time and space. The censorship of the market over what is difficult and innovative, over what is intellectually and aesthetically demanding . . . is often more effective than that exercised by political censorship and suppression.” As a description of what is happening to Finsbury Health Centre it can hardly be bettered.

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