



The **Redbridge Newsletter**

*produced by retired members in Redbridge to
share with colleagues across London*

Summer 2021

**‘Our aim is to reflect the
eclectic mix of topics
which engage us’**

Liz Dolan writes about our evolving publication

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Some years ago, the newly formed steering group of Redbridge NUT retired teachers decided to create a paper newsletter for general distribution among our Redbridge retired teachers.

Now, as NEU members along with our former ATL colleagues and incorporating both teachers and support staff, we have a much wider circulation and the Newsletter has developed into an on-line only version of increasing length and variety.

We made the decision for the Spring 2021 edition to widen the distribution further and invited contributions from colleagues in other London boroughs. The take-up has been gratifying and has encouraged us to be more creative and adventurous in our coverage of issues.

Our aim is to reflect the eclectic mix of topics which engage us and to recognise that this publication is now much more than simply a vehicle for local news.

We may be retired but we are all still active both as individuals and as participants in Union affairs, supporting those still working and indeed often helping to provide the backbone of organisation at District level and when appropriate assisting with casework and with contacting school reps and others at Branch level.

Children, schools, the curriculum and the working conditions of teachers and support staff are very much at the forefront of our concerns; the current situation during the pandemic has heightened the desire to work with others towards positive change. Additionally, our interest and involvement in more general national and international issues, as well as

in some of the reflective thinking which shapes the society we live in, continue to motivate us.

This Summer 2021 edition demonstrates that retired people do still have minds and the need to go on talking and writing about everything under the sun! The editorial team hopes that you will find the result worth reading.



Retired but still active (pre-lockdown): Retired Redbridge teachers (and friends) enjoy a guided tour of the historic Jewish East End with author and activist David Rosenberg

Obituary:

Gerry Kelly, 1951-2021

Gerry worked in Waltham Forest NEU as Assistant NUT Secretary from 2012 until his retirement in 2016. Katharine Lindenberg, the current District Secretary, replaced him as Assistant Secretary. He was also President of Waltham Forest NUT twice and was a committee member and London Regional Council delegate. He was a great caseworker and was involved in all our campaigns, giving up a lot of his free time.

He became a teacher at age of 50, which is almost unheard of now. His first Conference was at Manchester and he was a regular after that. I remember his first speech and there was at least one at every Conference after that. He is also remembered in Waltham Forest for his time in the bar after meetings. He would hold court while drinking red wine, remembering many stories from his past and quoting from literature and history. He had a fantastic memory and was very entertaining to be with.

Gerry was always loyal to Waltham Forest NEU and was a person of great depth and experience. He will be greatly missed.



Interview with a Year 11 pupil about how the Virus has affected her education

Tell me a bit about yourself and how things were before Covid-19

I am dyslexic, I've always been good at maths and sporty, practical things so I had chosen Drama and PE as my option subjects. I enjoy English but have always had trouble with spelling and putting my ideas in writing, so I was a bit worried about taking my GCSE exams but I was working really hard and thought I would be ok. I was loving playing for the upper school netball team against other schools and looking forward to doing athletics again in the summer term. My ambition was to become a dancer.

Looking back what are your memories of the first lockdown in March 2020?

The first lockdown started just a term and a half into my Year 10. At first it didn't really seem all that bad and I was pleased to have a few extra weeks on our Easter holiday but as time went on it became obvious that it was serious and was going to last longer than everyone had originally thought.

All my friends and me were really jealous of the Year 11s when their exams were cancelled and the teachers were going to assess their work and give them grades instead. No one thought the pandemic would last another year and we expected to be back at school as normal during the summer term.

The things that were making us annoyed then were that we were missing our sports activities. I was more worried about the dance classes I was missing than a few weeks away from school. None of us knew anyone who had Covid-19 so the virus seemed very remote. My mum is a nurse working in the community and she had volunteered to go and work in the Nightingale hospital being set up at the Excel Centre but she never got sent there, so I didn't think it could be that serious.

What happened about your school work during this time?

None of our lessons were set up on zoom in the first lockdown but we were set work by email and had to do it and send it back. That was ok because it was mainly revision of what we had done already but when we still weren't back at school by the summer term, the Drama teacher wanted us to start the GCSE coursework and this was very confusing because we hadn't finished the practical work yet that the coursework was based on. Looking back, this would

have been a good time to have some zoom sessions. I kept doing my best but kept having my drama work sent back with lots of negative comments that didn't make sense to me.

My dyslexia was becoming a big problem. At school, I could always go to the special needs department when I needed a bit of help. I kept writing more things according to the teacher's comments but I was using too many words and going over the wordcount. My teacher said she would help me with it when we go back to school but I had spent a lot of time on this that I could have spent on other subjects. My mum was too busy working long hours to spend time on my school-work and I was having to collect my five year-old brother from school at 3.15pm and look after him because there was no after-school club. We only had one computer at home, so I couldn't use it when mum came home because she had to write up her work in the evening.

How was your emotional state during this time?

I still didn't know anyone who had Covid, so that didn't really worry me but two of my friends, both young men, a few years older than me, killed themselves within ten days of each other during May. They didn't know each other; it was just a coincidence that both deaths happened so close together. One was from my dancing school and one from a dog rescue charity that I volunteer for. The isolation of lockdown had pushed them both over the edge. I started getting depressed then and couldn't believe what was happening to us.

Then we heard we were going back to school for the last few weeks of the summer term. I was really looking forward to seeing my friends again. In fact, this didn't really happen and we only got to go in a few of us at a time and we didn't have proper lessons, just talking to someone who wasn't our normal teachers. We couldn't do any practical stuff and I got really worried about coursework.

How were you feeling about your GCSE studies by the end of the summer term and during the summer holiday?

We had to do all the PE practical for our course-work on our own over the summer holiday and it had to be written up by October. I really struggled with this. (When my teacher told my mum at our zoom par-



“The mask was so hot and I couldn’t understand properly what people were saying”. The student in the picture above clearly sympathises!

ents’ meeting in January that I could have done better at it, I got really upset ‘cos I know I could have done well in my PE GCSE if it hadn’t been for Covid.) We had missed so much learning time and I didn’t know how we were going to cover the syllabus just during Year 11. Then there was so much trouble about the GCSE grades that the Year 11s got last summer and the teachers’ grades were downgraded. The Government kept on insisting that our GCSEs would be normal exams and I was really worried.

How was the first term of year 11?

When we went back in September it was terrible having to wear masks all the time and stay in our bubble confined to a small part of the school. The mask was so hot and I couldn’t understand properly what people were saying. This made me get very stressed and I started to get panic attacks. I got six negative referrals during October and November and I’d only had two in my whole time at the school before them. They were all for pulling my mask down for a few moments in the corridor between lessons. Someone in the office was monitoring the CCTV in the corridors. I was suffering a lot of anxiety and so were my friends. The teachers had to stay in their ‘box’ at the front of the class and couldn’t come over to help us.

I couldn’t get any help from the special needs department with my PE and Drama coursework

because my bubble wasn’t allowed to go to that part of the building. We weren’t allowed any of our written work that we had left at school before Covid and we couldn’t take school books home because it was against the safety rules. We haven’t done any science practicals in Key Stage 4 except in the first term of Year 10. My Drama teacher only had time to help me with my coursework twice - then she got ill. In November things got really bad. Lots of my teachers and friends got Covid or had to self-isolate because someone in their family or school bubble had it. My mum got Covid and was ill for three weeks. I had to do most of the housework and cooking and had to be off school isolating and look after my little brother. I was so worried about my GCSE mocks in December. My panic attacks got really bad then. And through all this the Government kept on saying that we were definitely going to have proper GCSE exams. We were all getting stressed and crying a lot and we could see that our teachers were getting stressed too. Some of them seemed to be a bit near the edge of a break down.

How were you feeling about your future?

I decided that becoming a dancer was no longer a sensible ambition. I had missed dance lessons for almost a year and the dance school I had got a place at when I left school had gone bankrupt. Besides, working in the theatre over the next few years was not a good prospect. I was starting to think that I wanted to do A levels but I didn’t have the self-confidence to tell anyone. I thought they would laugh at me because I am dyslexic. I told my nan one day and she encouraged me to have confidence in myself.

I was particularly worried about maths because you have to get a level 7 to do A level and I have always only been predicted a level 6. I know I understand the concepts but I often make silly mistakes with the calculations because of my dyslexia. Our maths homework is always set on-line and this doesn’t let me show how much I know very well because it is just right or wrong and doesn’t take the method into account.

Tell me about the Mock GCSEs in December.

I really wanted to do well in the Mocks even though we hadn’t really learned much new stuff for nearly a year. The Government was still insisting that our GCSE exams would happen as normal in the summer, so we didn’t realise that these mocks were anything other than a practice.

Some of our teachers set us exams that only covered what we had learned but others said it would be good for us to have ‘real’ papers, so we could see

A Beginner's Guide to Dowsing

The link between Wanstead and the Romans is a relatively familiar one. Less familiar is the role that dowsing - the ancient art of finding water - played in discovering a mosaic in Wanstead Park.

Centuries ago, when an avenue of trees was being planted, the workers found the mosaic, called over the person in charge, who told them to get on with their work. So, it was immediately covered over, with nothing written about where the find was made. It will probably be necessary to have another dowsing session to pin-point where the mosaic used to be – or may still be!

The Uses of Dowsing

I have been surprised many times over the years that many people have accepted that dowsing is a natural way to find water. Someone, whose family were originally from Ireland, told me once that dowsers were called in to find water for their land.

I am also told that it is also common practice in France - if you want to find water for your land, you call the local dowser.

I have seen a Thames Water van turn up, park and a chap get out with dowsing rods. When I asked him about it, he said he had a computer in the van, but using dowsing rods was quicker.

Very recently I chatted to a person in the local street about working for a water company, and he also said he used dowsing rods. Employing dowsing

for archaeology seems slightly removed from public perception. Yet, relatively recently I was told that volunteers on an archaeological site near the south coast were given dowsing training.

Dowsing Technique

Years ago, a chap who was sceptical but who wanted to find a local water course, was given the following guidance: relax, think of what you want to find, then lift up the rods and see what happens. He was surprised when they moved. Shortly afterwards, looking for another water course, he was equally surprised when two local fishermen (when fishing permits were being used on Ornamental Water) said that they also did dowsing. It seemed that even 'down to earth' people use dowsing as if it were normal.

Dowsing does not involve any digging, only rods with GPS, to record exactly where they are pointing. A notebook will cross-reference the position and what the dowsers say about what was found in that patch. Temporary small flags are put in the ground to see if there is a pattern. They are picked up before the end of the session, ready for when they are needed on another occasion.

It has been suggested that I could organise a taster dowsing event in Wanstead Park for retired teachers – after lockdown restrictions have eased of course.

Janet Cornish



Dowsing in Wanstead Park

Bullying in School: one teacher's personal experience

I worked in a large primary school in Outer London and eventually retired on grounds of stress. To retire early was never my plan - perhaps at 60 but not at 55!

I had always wanted to teach and felt that I was good at it, enjoying the children (even the 'naughty ones' - now referred to as children with challenging behaviour!) and getting on well with the parents and other staff.

A New Head and New Curriculum

A new headteacher was appointed around the same time as the new National Curriculum was introduced – a new curriculum that would challenge my teaching style. I was agreeable to the offer of guidance, but it was decided that, as I was responsible for Nursery and Reception, I would move to the Nursery Class (Early Years had not been made a Key Stage then). Fine - I organised group meetings, went to staff training, was a member of the senior management team and went to those meetings. But I began to feel an outsider and not part of the whole school team.

I tried several times to run staff training based around our 'Early Years' classes, aiming to inform all teachers about what we do in these years but, unfortunately, we were a forgotten group and not included in many whole school events.

Neglect and Exclusion

The situation at the start hadn't been too bad. Just a few things in my professional development (appraisal as it was then) were overlooked and my reminders went unheeded. However, one day, quite a while after all the reminders, the person responsible for my assessment /development just turned up (bear in mind no targets had been set). 'I'm observing you this session'. Ok, fine, I'll go along with this - at least it's progress.

They stayed for an hour, noting everything down and at the end did not have the grace to thank me and inform me when I would get my feedback. Something else I'm still waiting for!

We had a few staffing gaps in our year group but was I involved in any of the selection processes? Even if my opinion had been asked and I could have viewed the application forms, that would have been something at least. One very embarrassing time for me was during the employment of a Nursery Nurse

for our year. Not being involved in the application process, I had no idea who had been selected and who was going to be in my team. So, I did not meet the new person until the day before we were opening for the coming term and was introduced as class teacher, not Early Years Co-Ordinator/Senior Group Leader.

From Bad to Worse

Then things began to just get worse. Instead of encouragement, I had the sense that I was not one of the 'favoured ones'. However, I ignored all this - it was not going to drag me down. I was there for the good of the children and this was my chosen career, but it felt like the senior staff were trying to break me. Our senior staff team was re-organised and, even though I had two management points, I was not included. Even when Early Years was recognised as a Key Stage, I was excluded, and others reported to me what decisions had been made.

'Move, get another position', I hear you say. Tried that but got little support! I believe that references were not sent when requested and when other head teachers asked to see me teach via my head, this request was not forwarded to me until an hour beforehand. Unfortunately, it began to feel like they needed someone to punish - a scapegoat to be blamed to make them feel better.

One time the caretaker asked if I was moving schools or leaving because he had seen my job advertised in the local paper. I had not become that hardened but kept asking - Why, why, was this going on.

Then along comes Threshold and Performance Management..... Yeah!!!

It was obvious to me that Threshold was something I would never achieve and in that thought alone I was correct. I was observed and criticised. Observed again - still not good enough - go and watch some of the 'favourites' teach. I could do nothing to get that all important seal of approval.

I was eventually given a new role to support the Early Years (especially transition to Year 1) and PSHE for the whole school and, as I was not a specialist, I was allowed to go on a course – finally one I could relate to. My enjoyment, however, was marred by the fact that a non-qualified person from our PPA

cover-team was also a participant. My work for the course and the observations should have been enough to secure my threshold, as that year I had actually fulfilled all my targets, but some excuse was made. Still a no for me!!

Health Issues

Unfortunately I had an eye/visual condition, which made using the computer and the overhead projector a trigger for migraine, both at school and at home. And this was when things got really rough for me, as the head teacher would not believe me. My attendance was not at all acceptable, I agree, but the truth was that the stress I incurred was contributing to the problem. Things were increasingly eating away at me :

- *I was not good enough*
- *Don't listen to her she doesn't know what she is doing*
- *was not actually doing the job I was paid for*

Unfair management

There were incidents that occurred during the school day regarding pupils but only I was asked for a written report. It was as if I was the only one being held to account. And, after I was physically abused by a child, there was no follow-up by management.

Final Days

Finally, it just got too much for me. After returning to School for the new year, I was called in to set targets for my new professional development plan and sign off on last year's. To my mind everything was OK, except it wasn't due to my pupils not achieving the required number of passes on a phonics test because of a child leaving. I suggested

that my mentor call the school my previous pupil had moved to and get the result from them. Oh no - not an option. I was basically told then that I :

- was a failing teacher
- was unable to motivate children to learn
- left everything up to support staff
- would have my management points carefully considered if I did not improve
- needed to provide evidence of work to support the children who had done well in the test

It was the most demoralising time of my teaching career and, on my return from a miserable half-term break, because of illness, I went to see the doctor with my symptoms. After I finished speaking, he took my hand and said, 'Do you think this is perhaps due to stress at work or in your daily life?' I just burst into tears, couldn't stop and started shaking. They would not let me go home and my son was called to come to collect me. I was given three months off for work-related stress. All my resolve to keep going was gone - I could not fight it anymore.

End of a Career and a New Start

A year later, I took early retirement on grounds of ill health. I am glad to say I'm feeling much better now. Yes, I miss my friends from work and the children most of all. But health must come first, and I learned this the hard way.

I also miss teaching, but my life is so much better now - relaxed and enjoyable. No more migraines, no more illnesses. My children have even remarked that I'm like a new person.

Anon

HAVE YOUR SAY!

Redbridge Retired Teachers are keen to provide a voice and a space in the Newsletter for other retired colleagues in London. If you would like to submit an article, poem, report, photograph, letter, brief comment or almost anything else, please get in touch with us by emailing Mike Peters at mike321peters@gmail.com

A poem from *My Lockdown Life Story Poems*, by Barbara Roy-Macauley*

A.C.A.P.

During one career phase
I was working with the primary stage.
Children from Caribbean background
Were the main group in the playground.

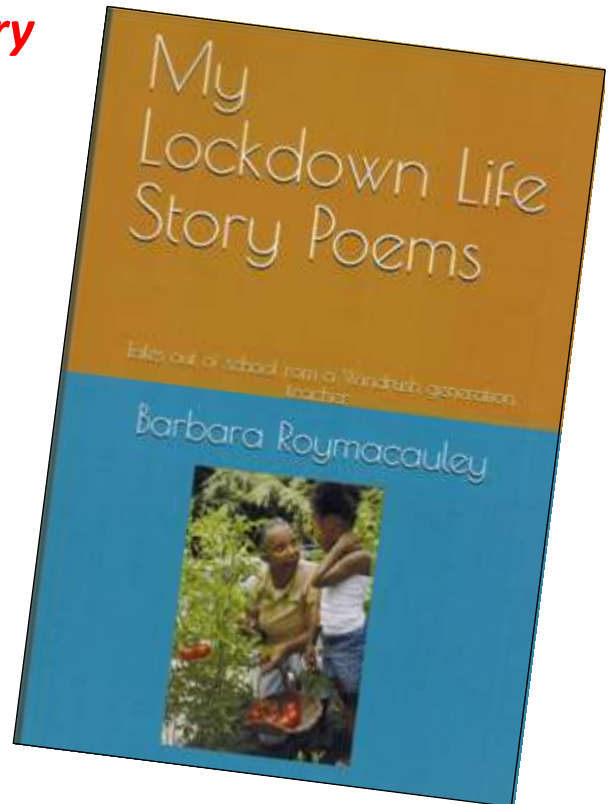
I went to work in Walthamstow
An outer London region
I knew the teachers' centre
From visiting it in the Autumn season
When I had first started teaching.

I turned up on the first day,
I was met by 'Ash', the receptionist
She greeted me with the broadest smile
And spoke in the nicest way
While I started to become a specialist.

I was shown to the team room
But was shocked the boss had departed
Her deputy was sworn in
Showing me how to get started.
Where necessary she filled me in.

One example was training
the Wednesday afternoon professionals.
This was to increase my potential.
It was full of reading and comprehension
It helped me with the history questions
And the essential historical omissions.

Classmates in the group
were strong in character
Laughing loudly in the corridor.
Eating large mangos during the lecture
Instead of offering intellectual conjecture
Edward and his six kids



With his dog-eared notes
Could not read what he wrote.
Political Dezreen with her
Baby up her coat.
Made us a surprise visit ending
On a happy note laughing.

Nice and tall from Trinidad
A secondary colleague called Pat.
We started working
together on day one
In wood street schools.
Sharing tasks and book reviews.

I learned a lot academically.
From Ernest and from Ivy,
The published histories
and key biographies
Were adult education at its best
And continued to constantly consume all my
interest.

*Once I have decided on a key area, I then use typical writing techniques. In the book I have used acrostics, word banks, story structures, rap rhythms/ musical vibes etc.

I am a member of Lapidus, which is a poetry writing group. In normal times they meet every other month, but now only via zoom. During that time the leaders host creative writing sessions and we have the chance to write/respond and share. This does make you more confident.

Many members are part of a strong writing tradition – the MA in writing / creative writing at Sussex University. Other Universities include Liverpool - *Barbara Roy-Macauley*)

Julius Nyerere; an African Socialist

We sometimes hear the question, “Is there a country where socialism has worked?” But what do we mean by “worked”? Some who ask this question are thinking in terms of profits for large corporations, trading agreements which benefit richer countries rather than poorer ones and other benefits associated with neo-liberalism and capitalism.

Socialist Countries

There are examples of Socialist regimes where the standard of literacy has improved, increased health-care for larger numbers of the population has been established, where the infant mortality rate has been reduced dramatically and where fewer people live in poverty. However, these countries are often perceived as failed states by outsiders. Some of the causes of disappointment can be attributed to the international community’s failure to support Socialist regimes and sometimes to their policy of actively undermining them. There are, of course, other issues which can lead to failure and the rejection of Socialism by the population of a country.

Tanzania

However, there are several countries where Socialism has demonstrably benefited large numbers of people, even when it has not been possible to sustain the changes which were made. One such country was Tanzania during the presidency of Julius Nyerere, which is probably the finest example of a nation where African Socialism was introduced.

African Socialism and Nyerere

Julius Nyerere, Léopold Senghor of Senegal, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sékou Touré of Guinea were the main architects of African Socialism. Senghor claimed community life meant Socialism was natural to Africa and class struggle was irrelevant, distinguishing African Socialism from Marxism and European Socialist theory. Nyerere was drawn to African Socialism, advocating a traditional sharing of resources, based on the extended family, which in Kiswahili is known as Ujamaa. Nyerere’s politics extended beyond family, tribe, community, nation and continent to ‘embrace the whole society of mankind’. His ideal was the ‘equality and freedom of all’. This ideal certainly appealed to large numbers of Tanzanians, who generally treated him with the greatest respect, referring to him as ‘Father of the Nation’ or ‘Mwalimu’ (teacher).



The young Julius Nyerere

Julius Nyerere as Leader

Nyerere was Prime Minister of Tanganyika from 1961 to 1962, President from 1963 to 1964 and then President of Tanzania (the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar) from 1964 to 1985. He was one of the founders of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). Nyerere was a fascinating and charismatic leader who transformed Tanzanian society. He was a member of the minority Zanaki people. Being a member of a minority group gave him an advantage because it meant he was not associated with a large and dominant group, such as the Wachagga, who live in the Kilimanjaro area.

Nyerere was partly educated in Britain and influenced by the Fabians. At independence in 1963, the country inherited a society with divisions between classes, between rural and urban people, between different parts of the country, between peasant farmers and larger farmers and between the elite and the vast majority of the people. Nyerere’s vision for Tanzania was set out in the 1967 Arusha Declaration, in which a number of policy changes were explained. Large salaries were to be reduced, especially for government employees and resources were moved from urban to rural areas, with the aim of advancing peasant farming to a higher standard. One plan was the development of Ujamaa villages, where people would have communal land and work together so that the whole community would benefit.

Nyerere was determined to change society, eradicate the relics of colonialism and promote co-operation, egalitarianism and the practice of some citizens making sacrifices to benefit the whole nation. The Arusha Declaration also aimed to reduce the

country's dependence on the world economy and introduce the policy of self-reliance, to avoid too much influence from international capitalist interests. Nyerere also wanted to reduce dependence on foreign aid and investment. Small-scale projects were favoured, especially rural rather than urban developments. Local control of funds was encouraged and the state ownership of banks and certain companies planned. Free education for all was to be established and the promotion of equality for women and women's rights were to be among the priorities. The expectation was that people would see this as just, fair and right, and in line with traditional African society.

Problems with Tanzanian Socialism

In the long run, Tanzanian Socialism could not be sustained. Some of the problems came from the international situation. Western powers were alarmed at the alliances Nyerere made with communist governments in China and Cuba and his unstinting support for resistance to apartheid in South Africa. He was well-respected in Africa and played a significant role in the Organisation of African Unity, but the West was suspicious.

The 1970s oil crisis also had an impact on the economy and export prices collapsed. This hit Tanzania particularly hard with respect to coffee and sisal, two vital exports. There were two successive droughts which affected production and there was a great reduction in foreign investment compared to previous years. Furthermore, in 1978 the war with Uganda meant that Tanzania's finances were severely drained.

Some of these issues were exacerbated by internal opposition, both from some groups of peasant farmers, who resisted being moved into communities and from the newly educated elite, who had begun to expect a comfortable lifestyle and to purchase property and businesses. Understandably they were not in favour of Socialism. They knew it would not indulge their privileges. Sadly, Ujamaa Socialism did not benefit economic development in Tanzania and, when Nyerere resigned in 1985, it was still one of the poorest countries in the world.

Achievements

We should recognise that Nyerere's policies were based on his ethical principles and led to some remarkable successes. The figures for infant mortality show a decline from 138 per 1000 live births in 1965 to 110 in 1985. Life expectancy rose from 37 in 1960 to 52 in 1984. Enrolment in primary schools grew from 25% (16% of girls) in 1960 to 72% (85% of

girls) in 1985. All this was achieved despite the considerable growth in population. Adult literacy increased from 17% in 1960 to 63% in 1975. Health-care also improved for many Tanzanians. Nyerere aimed to create many local clinics to bring advice and treatment to rural areas rather than focus solely on establishing large hospitals in urban areas.

Role of Education

Nyerere was a great believer in education, hence his firm commitment to universal, free, compulsory schooling. He stressed that minds should be educated, but also hands, in order to develop the resources of Africa. He did not, however, believe that an African society needed to be taught about Socialism: 'We, in Africa, have no more need of being 'converted' to Socialism than we have of being 'taught' democracy. Both are rooted in our past...in the traditional society which produced us'.

Nyerere's Reputation

It is rare for politicians, historians and journalists, all influenced by their own perspectives, to reach a consensus about events and people in history and it is particularly difficult to gain a consistent and unbiased overview of Julius Nyerere, for he was a complex and controversial individual. On his death in 1999, the journalist, Richard Gott, wrote in the Guardian that Nyerere was 'an extraordinarily benign and charismatic figure unequalled on the world stage' but the conservative commentator, Anthony Daniels, reported in the Daily Mail that 'his influence was almost wholly evil and pernicious'. In fact, obituaries and tributes were many and varied.

The most scathing obituary was that of Daniels, who accused Nyerere of ruining the country and destroying its infrastructure. He acknowledged his modesty, charm and incorruptibility, but criticised his 'swift conversion to extreme Socialism' and his 'crude, stupid and vicious economic ideas'. Victoria Britten, on the other hand, emphasised Nyerere's successes in education and health provision and his tireless 'crusade against poverty'.

Sometimes the press sounded infuriated by Nyerere. One British journalist observed, 'Nyerere always comes out of it pure; nobody ever blames him'. He suggested Nyerere 'let others do the hatchet work'. His critics, sometimes grudgingly, usually acknowledged his charm, sincerity, incorruptibility and humility and the importance of his legacy, with Cornelli believing that the 'strong moral resonance' of Nyerere's beliefs is still of great relevance in Tanzania

Jo Buchanan

Joint District Secretary Venda Premkumar's Report to Redbridge NEU AGM, March 2021



NEU members at Beal High School took several days of strike action this term in defence of sick pay and sickness absence policies. The issues were successfully resolved (details p.13)

What an extraordinary year it has been!

When Covid-19 first hit us, and lockdown 1 commenced on March 23rd. 2020, there was a lot of fear amongst educators about this novel virus. With an incompetent government in charge that seemed to want to rely on herd immunity to fight the virus, educators felt like they were lambs to the slaughter, being sent into unsafe workplaces.

Increasing Numbers and Strength

Nationally, and locally, NEU members turned in their millions to the unions. Whilst attendance on the national Union zoom reached historic levels, Redbridge NEU meetings continued to grow in size too, as members wanted to know Union advice and guidance. At its height, we had over 300 members on a call. We also called a meeting for support-staff only and we had about 140 members on the call, 50% of our support-staff members. Our rep numbers grew exponentially too. We picked up over 60 new reps during Covid, as members realized there needed to be someone in school who would communicate with management about Health and Safety concerns. Thanks to the new reps, Redbridge NEU evolved into

an even more dynamic, energized and strong branch and district. We have a fantastic 100-strong rep-base now.

With this new-found strength, we were able to take on big fights and win. Early on, in the pandemic, we were able to pressure the LA to delay opening in June 2020 by two weeks. Our campaigning also led to Redbridge schools moving to online learning three days before the Christmas break – one of four boroughs nationally to take this stance. We were also able to win a number of local agreements that kept our members safe in schools, including better protection for pregnant women members and CEV staff. It is fair to say, Redbridge local authority was factoring in the response of the NEU in its decisions, and Redbridge heads started taking us seriously. We've also had some important fights in schools that we have been able to take up, thanks to the new-found confidence of members.

Successes

In June, members in Winston Way Academy used S44 collective to stop unsafe opening of school in

June 2020 when the academy trust didn't follow the local authority stance. The trust backed down.

In January 2021, Oaks Park members used S44 collectively to stop the School from bringing in staff to deliver online learning. The School backed down.

Recently, Beal High School members took the first day of strike action on 25th. March. They are trying to overturn a very punitive sickness policy. Their slogan is: Don't sack the sick - and they have our full support. [Action subsequently successful]

Only yesterday, Oaks Park High school members voted to have an indicative ballot. They are trying to fight the victimization of their rep, Keiran Mahon.

And, of course, it goes without saying that there are countless other collective actions taken by members in other schools that have ensured the safety of their school community and addressed the working conditions of staff.

During the last year, because of the health crisis that we have faced, we have been able to build good networks with community groups and parent groups. We hope to strengthen these connections in the coming year and thanks to one of them, we were able to distribute 400 learning packs to children through the Redbridge Mutual Aid group.

As awful as the pandemic has been for our communities, it has also been an opportunity for the Union to showcase what an effective union can do to safeguard its members and the community. It has been a successful year for the district – we've grown in numbers and we've grown in strength and influence too.

I should mention, as a last point, another consequence of Covid is that educators are also much more tech savvy now – I'm not sure our students would agree with us on that one though!

Future Priorities

Looking ahead to 2021 and 2022, these are some of our priorities:

- Supporting and training the new reps and helping to improve their confidence is going to be key.

- Recruiting more support staff. Support staff are nationally not very unionized and an exceptionally low number of them are in unions. In Redbridge, out of 3300 members, approximately 300 are support-staff. However, the case work we do does not reflect that they are disproportionately affected by the bullying culture in schools.

There are going to be countless other challenges coming our way – however, I think we are in a much stronger position than we have ever been before.



Redbridge NEU banner on the Beal picket line

With unity and solidarity, we can keep fighting and keep winning.

Venda Premkumar

Joint Secretary, Redbridge Division, NEU

Updates:

Beal High School Dispute on Sickness Policy: We are very pleased to report that NEU members at Beal High School have voted to suspend further strike action on the basis the management have met the demands of the union. The school has conceded to:

- *Uncouple disciplinary and capability procedure from the school's sickness policy.*
- *Remove two-tier sick-pay scheme. Newer staff who were on worse contracts will now have parity with those on old contracts.*
- *Formal warnings under sickness will no longer be disclosed in references.*

Well done to the principled and determined strikers. Sylvain and Sajia have worked tirelessly for their members. Thanks to the parents at Beal High School for their fantastic support.

Oaks Park High School: Following the summary dismissal of the rep. Keiran Mahon. Redbridge NEU organised an online rally at which Venda Premkumar and Bill Stockwell (co-rep) gave an account of the chilling sequence of events leading up to this point. Messages of solidarity were posted from branches across the country during the rally. Mary Bousted (NEU joint general secretary) gave a rousing and forthright statement of support. Her message was that the victimisation of union members and school reps cannot be allowed to prevent people fulfilling their union role or carrying out their jobs in safety, and in the view of the NEU "this is a fight we can win". Members at Oaks Park have been balloted and subsequently strike action consisting of 6 days beginning on Tuesday 15th June has been sanctioned.

Early Years Testing: a return to the bad old days

What is the current obsession with testing in schools - moreover, testing that goes against all good practice developed through experience and rigorous research, and against everything that children, educational professionals and parents say they want?

We know that young children learn through play, dialogue and meaningful activities. Despite the evidence that unwarranted stress on young children and schools narrows the curriculum and generates a fear of failure within the whole school community, the Government is still planning to press ahead with the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) in September 2021.

Misguided Assessment for Young Children

The RBA is a maths and literacy computer test for four-year olds, designed as a basis for measuring progression across seven years of primary school. But as the campaign group 'More Than A Score' has pointed out in their report, Baseline Assessment: Why it Doesn't Add Up, young children are particularly susceptible to moods, tiredness or being distracted, making it impossible to capture the dynamism of children's learning through a single uniform test.

A number of reports and surveys have found that the majority of teachers, headteachers and parents don't support these plans, which will replace the current observational assessment practice in Reception. Given that only half of children attend nursery school and at least half are predicted to be 'not school-ready' in September, the veracity of the

tests will be further undermined, and experts in early years education have warned that the tests will threaten the quality of education and the well-being of children.

Results from the RBA Pilot

Teachers in the 2019 pilot RBA reported that their usual routines of settling children in during those crucial first six weeks of school had been disrupted and that a holistic, caring approach was being discarded. Children's reactions to the computer test included, 'I can't read ... I don't know ... What does that mean? ... When can I go?

Scrap the RBA

The RBA is not concerned with learning and development but is a numerical accountability measure used to judge early years and primary teachers' performance and provide narrow, decontextualised data for the DfE's competitive schools' market. It is not about what is best for four-year olds and, as such, should be scrapped.

More information about the RBA can be found here: <https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/reception-baseline-assessment-a-flawed-and-inappropriate-test/>

Read the NEU research into RBA here: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339500079_Reception_Baseline_Assessment_NEU_2020

Sign the petition here: <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/four-year-olds-dont-need-exams>

Liz Floyd



Image courtesy of morethanascore

lessons to learn 25 years on

The Murder of Hackney Downs School

Everyone's attention has been on the Pandemic during the past year, and so the 25th anniversary of the closure of Hackney Downs School has passed without a commemorative reunion or even so much as a mention.

Therefore, I felt it would be sobering to mark its passing by remembering what led to its closure, followed by some reflections about changes in education over the last 25 years and how these relate to the demise of a school with such a proud history of providing quality education for 120 years, latterly to a wide range of pupils from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

From its origins as a school for the sons of predominantly middle-class entrepreneurs, through its days as a renowned Grammar School for bright East-End boys, to its life as a progressive comprehensive school, praised by many educationists for its enlightened attitudes and educational innovations, Hackney Downs School has passed through many incarnations, but has always proudly served the needs of the local population to the best of its ability. It is still a travesty that it was killed off so ruthlessly.

Current Shambles

In December 2020, just before the end of an almost impossible term across the UK, there were very public disagreements between educationalists working in schools and the Government. The situation in London had reached crisis point during November.

Several Headteachers had reached out for support from their professional organisations, local authorities etc, and had decided that they had no practical option but to close a few days early for the Christmas break. Three London Boroughs - Greenwich, Islington and Waltham Forest - bravely backed the Heads' decision despite the Government's high-handed threats of legal action unless schools remained open.

The dire Health and Safety issues in the schools were real and those working in them knew how serious the situation was, yet they were ignored and forced to open again at the start of the Spring term, only to be told to close again the following day. Who



'Hackney Downs: the school that dared to fight', by Maureen O'Connor, Elizabeth Hales and others.

knows how many lives could have been saved if the Government had respected and taken notice of those at the 'chalk-face' of the crisis and reacted more quickly?

Scapegoating a School

The irony of this situation to me was that it was happening exactly 25 years since we held our final Hackney Downs School assembly in December 1995, at the end of a similarly bizarre term, when sadly the School closed for the last time. I still see the confused and sad faces of the pupils and staff who had worked so hard for nearly two years to keep the school open. Hackney Downs School had been used as a pawn in the shambles of political in-fighting and opportunism. Intimidation and misinformation, on the part of Local Education Officers and rival factions within the

Hackney Labour Party, was followed by shameless opportunism on the part of the failing Conservative Government of the mid-nineties, more than willing to use the School and its staff as scapegoats in their efforts to blame anyone but themselves for their own ineptitude. The establishment ran rough-shod over the needs and well-being of the mainly working-class pupils and families as if they just didn't matter. They re-wrote history for their own ends. And similar things are still happening now.

Hackney Downs History

In 1990, I joined Hackney Downs as a Deputy Head just after its control had passed to the newly formed Hackney Education Authority when the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) was disbanded. I had grown-up in Hackney, had boy cousins who had attended HDS in the 1950s and 60s and therefore felt a strong allegiance to the School and immensely privileged to have been appointed. It was a bit like coming home.

The School had several problems. Its buildings had been allowed to deteriorate for some time and were in urgent need of serious repair. Boys' schools were losing their popularity and this had resulted in a fall in pupil numbers, particularly of pupils in the higher ability bands, which adversely affected exam results. Many believe that the out-going ILEA had put the School on a 'cause for concern' list, due to militant action during the 1980s, when asbestos had been found in the main building and the School NUT officers had organised a walk-out, insisting on moving the School to alternative provision during complete 'stripping out' work rather than ILEA's plan of keeping the building in use during less extensive work.

The new Hackney LEA promised much. In particular, the idea was put forward in 1992 for the school to become co-educational and to have a complete renovation. In reality, the school continued to be totally neglected and abandoned to its fate. It is likely that the Hackney LEA was preparing to close the school very soon after its inception. Certainly, facts came to light later to indicate that this was the case.

Ofsted Inspection

In March 1993 I became the third Acting Head Teacher at Hackney Downs in 15 months, the LEA having blocked the appointment of a permanent Headteacher. Two months later, we were one of the first inner city schools to have an Ofsted inspection. (This was rumoured to have been at the invitation of the LEA, believing an Ofsted failure would make it easier to close the school). The early Ofsted frame-

work was designed by those with no experience or knowledge of the difficulties faced by schools such as HDS and was totally unsuited to judging the merits of a struggling school in a deprived area. For example, two thirds of our pupils qualified for free school meals, over half did not speak English at home, many being transient and traumatised refugees with hardly any English at all. A third of the pupils had been at the school for less than two years when they took GCSE exams and we also took in twice the number of pupils excluded from other schools as any other Hackney school. Despite these factors our attendance and exam results were judged against national criteria.

The Inspectors were very supportive and admitted they could not have done any better, given our circumstances. They confidently assumed that putting us into 'special measures' (as an Ofsted failure was then called) would 'encourage the Hackney Education Authority to provide the financial and practical support we so obviously needed'. Instead, Hackney LEA seemed to be doing everything they could to make life as difficult as possible for us to survive. Two follow-up inspections by HMI during the following year noted improvements and praised the work of the management and other staff in implementing our part of the School Improvement Plan, but the LEA had not done their bit.

Steps Towards Closure

Parents and other supporters had been outraged when plans to close Hackney Downs were leaked to the press in October 1993, just days before the parents of primary school leavers were due to make a choice of school for secondary transfer. The plan for closure had not been disclosed, even to the Head or Governors. The motivation for closing the School was never clear but was rumoured to have been in order to make a big profit out of selling the land. Throughout, we held joint union meetings and the staff and management remained united. The school NUT rep was invited to attend school management meetings. A very high profile and successful campaign resulted in the full Council voting, in the summer of 1995, that Hackney Downs should remain open - thereby reversing the Education Committee's earlier decision to close the school.

This was a landmark decision, due in large-part to a speech by the Chair of our Governing Body which brought to light much of the misinformation, including serious accounting errors, that had been used to back the earlier decision for closure, and was greeted by cheers and celebration. The Director of Education



Pupils and staff worked hard for nearly two years to keep Hackney Downs School open

left the meeting, shouting that we would be shut despite the vote and we should, 'Just wait and see!' He had been determined that the school should close and may then have urged the Government to take the school over. He never returned to his post as Chief Education Officer in Hackney. Within days we received many requests for Year 7 pupils to join the school in September.

Government Intervention

Just ten days later, the Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Shepherd, announced she was 'minded' to remove the school from the control of the LEA, using previously unused powers of the 1993 Education Act, despite having stated in Parliament a week earlier that the Government had no more interest in the future of the school. The North East London Education Association (NELEA) was formed, chaired by an industrialist, and took over the running of the school in July 1995. One of its members had been the Chair of the Education Committee that had appointed the Hackney Director of Education. Another was the retired Head of a prestigious

London Independent Grammar School, who stated proudly and outrageously that he was looking forward to inspecting special needs and academic achievement, since he had never before met a 'special needs chappie'.

From the start it was obvious that NELEA had no intention of providing the help and support promised. An HMI visit scheduled for October was cancelled and plans to close the School by the end of that Autumn term were made with unseemly haste. The NELEA became known from then on as 'The Hit Squad' and the School became national news. The closure plan openly included selling the land for profit but at the last moment the Clove Club, the alumni society, demonstrated that there was a covenant on the land, from when the Grocers' Company had given the School buildings and land to the London County Council in 1906, that it must be used for educational use 'in perpetuity'. Hence, the eventual formation of the newly built Mossbourne Community Academy on the Hackney Downs site, which opened in 2004. If Hackney Downs School had

received just a tenth of the money that this Academy did, it most certainly would have recovered and gone on to thrive.

The case was taken to Judicial Review on behalf of two pupils because the School's circumstances did not meet important criteria of the 1993 Education Act and therefore should never have been taken out of the hands of the LEA by the Government. Unfortunately, the school had already closed by the time the case was concluded, so the judgement was that 'no useful purpose would be served by reversing the decision to close it'.

Impact of Closure

The pupils were not well served, including a whole year group of Year 11 pupils, who had to change school just a few months before taking their GCSE examinations. Much of the GCSE coursework that the Hackney Downs Staff had so carefully marked and left for collection, was never passed on to the receiving schools - it was just dumped, along with everything else. Most pupils were assigned to transfer to Homerton House School, itself in difficulties and a 'rival' boys' school, in the minds of the pupils. (Its exam results the previous summer had been worse than those of Hackney Downs, which had shown the most improvement of all boys' schools in London.) Not a good move, particularly for the most sensitive

and emotionally damaged pupils, of which there were many. Because plans to sell off the school land could not happen, Homerton House did not receive the budget it had been promised to help manage the transfer, which made the situation even more problematic. In particular, the post for the Hackney Downs Deputy Head, who was supposed to transfer with the pupils to help facilitate their transition, could not be funded for the two years that had been promised.

Those pupils are men in their late thirties and early forties now and no follow-up studies have been done to see the effect that the trauma had on their academic achievements, life-experiences or wider mental health outcomes but we can be sure that these were not positive. The emotions evoked by the circumstances of the closure are still raw, despite time passing. The injustice of it all keeps the wounds open because lessons do not seem to have been learned.

In the next Newsletter I shall reflect on some aspects of what has happened within education and society during the last 25 years and how these relate to the life and closure of Hackney Downs School..

**Betty Hales, co-author of 'Hackney Downs:
The school that dared to fight'**

Tackling Sexism in Schools

Redbridge NEU recently hosted a meeting on the theme of sexism, the extent to which it is embedded in our society, and how it manifests in our schools. A number of speakers bravely shared their own experiences of harassment, both as pupils and as educators.

The discussion highlighted the need for our school curriculum to include an educational focus on what constitutes sexism and harassment, defining the characteristics and relating these to the prevalence of male aggression, too often fuelled by growing up with pornography and inappropriate interaction with social media, while not ignoring that males, too, may be the victims of sexism.

What emerged was a clear recognition that boys and men need to confront ingrained attitudes and historically accepted gender roles. It is not all about making the environment "safer" for females, altering female patterns of behaviour or about recommend-

ing avoidance of what should be everyday situations encountered without fear or anxiety. Men and boys need also to take responsibility.

Louise Regan outlined a range of educational material developed by the NEU, which offers ways of addressing inappropriate behaviour to reduce its incidence and diminish its impact, all of which can be accessed via the NEU website.

It was emphasised that there needs to be a whole-school approach, which arms children to deal with sexism in all its forms. School policies should consider innate sexism in matters such as uniform and access to different areas of the curriculum, as they impact on pupils of all genders.

The many issues raised in the meeting are ones which will not go away. We shall continue to address them in our newsletter.

Liz Dolan

The NHS:

Safe in their hands?

‘Danger of abuse in the health service is not in the way that ordinary people use the service. Abuse is always at the point where private commercialism impinges on the service – where an attempt is made to marry the incompatible principles of private profit with public service’. Aneurin Bevan, ‘In Place of Fear’ (1952).

In the 1980’s, Margaret Thatcher famously made the claim that ‘the NHS is safe in our hands’, despite the later release of Cabinet papers showing that she and her Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, had been contemplating the ‘dismantling of the welfare state’, accepting that this would be ‘the end of the NHS’. Some 30 years later, David Cameron was to give a similar assurance about the NHS’s safe custody, despite facilitating its severe and unnecessary underfunding as part of the Government’s austerity programme and overseeing ‘reforms’ designed to make the NHS anything but safe. So, why the need for this ongoing deception and subterfuge?

An object of love and hate

Seemingly, all should be relatively fine with the NHS as originally set up as a public service. Several studies have shown it to be one of the most cost-efficient and equitable healthcare systems in the world. For example, in 2010, The Commonwealth Fund survey of 20,000 patients in 11 industrialised countries found that the NHS was almost the least costly healthcare system of them all and, at the same time, gave one of the best levels of access to care. Moreover, the NHS is patently dear to the hearts of the British people, and there is not, and never has been, a political mandate for replacing it with a profit-based system of healthcare such as that in the USA.

So, what’s the problem? Well, apart from the NHS being vehemently opposed by the Conservative Party at its inception in 1948, the NHS presents a serious ideological dilemma for believers in the free-market, neo-liberal model of capitalism, with whom the present Tory cabinet is stuffed full. The fundamental issue for them is that a highly successful, essential service in the UK, which currently accounts for approximately £160bn of annual government expenditure and employs roughly 1.5m people, is paid for out of general taxation and is free

at the point of contact according to individual need. This represents the very antithesis of the free-market model, the essential features of which are private ownership of the means of production, self-interest as the driving force of economic activity, competition, provision according to ability to pay and private profit. Thus, for successive Tory governments, ideologically committed to the market system, a publicly funded national health service could not be seen to be working well, even if it obviously was. Quite simply, it just doesn’t accord with their beliefs. Hence, the need to undermine, marketise, sell-off and, ultimately, destroy something that, through gritted teeth, they’ve claimed to support, but actually abhor.

Taking the NHS Apart

What form has this planned destruction taken? Well, largely hidden from view and behind closed doors, on account of its obvious electoral unpopularity, a ‘salami slicing’ technique has been implemented to dismantle the NHS bit by bit over time as a public service through privatisation by stealth. Mainly Tory governments, but also, to its everlasting shame, the Blair government, have colluded with private interests, eager to avail themselves of the potentially rich pickings on offer, to transform the NHS from an integrated public service into a mere ‘kitemark’ attached to a fragmented system of competing private providers.

This process has deliberately been concealed by the use of language designed to lull and obfuscate, such as ‘patient choice’, ‘modernisation’, ‘restructuring’ and ‘contestability’, but absolutely never in language designed to reveal what is actually going on – namely, privatization, which has been the long-term goal of successive Tory governments. The latter began in the health service in the early 1980s with the subcontracting of cleaning services and has snowballed from there with the introduction of internal markets in the early 1990s, PFI, and the 2012 Lansley reforms. But then, in early 2020, a real party-pooper suddenly rocked up on the scene – the Coronavirus pandemic – and the need for a properly funded, nationally co-ordinated public health service now became clear for almost everyone to see.



New Reforms

Thus, in February 2021, in the midst of a fatally mismanaged pandemic, with one of the worst death rates and economic downturns in the world, the Government announced its proposals for yet another new set of reforms. These would sweep away the whole misbegotten disaster of previous reforms, which had been designed to fragment and encourage competition, by facilitating 'Integrated Care Systems' (ICS's), by downplaying the role of competition and by bringing the NHS firmly back under the control of the health secretary.

So, can we all now breathe a huge collective sigh of relief that this latest set of reforms will herald the end of the market-driven changes, surreptitiously brought in since the 1980s, and that the NHS can, from henceforth, operate in the way that it was originally intended? Well, unfortunately, it would seem not. On the contrary, the White Paper facilitates an even greater role for private providers as an integral, embedded part of the NHS structure, with less transparency and accountability over contracts. It's very much a case of the Tories getting up to their old tricks again with the true purpose of the reforms being deliberately hidden behind euphemistic, technical language and cloaked in large volumes of detail, explicitly designed to obscure and distract.

What form does the latest ploy to undermine NHS take? Well, the boards of these new ICS's will be made up of representatives from the NHS, local authorities, charities and, crucially, private companies, including large US multinational corporations, with powers to decide budgets and health service provision without any public supervision. The White Paper formalises the fragmentation of England into 42 separate ICSs, each with its own 'single pot' limited budget and with 'system control' totals that will compel healthcare providers to stay within budget. This would mark the end of a national health service and would be the final nail in the coffin of the



NHS as a comprehensive health-care system, with the NHS becoming merely a brand.

Current Dangers and Failures

Moreover, there is nothing to suggest that the NHS of the future will be protected against private profiteering, particularly as Tory MPs, in July 2020, voted down an amendment to the Government's trade bill that was intended to ensure that health services would not be on the table in any post-Brexit trade deals. Furthermore, the well documented Government- promoted bonanza of corruption (even as thousands of its citizens were dying from the Coronavirus) in the form of over £22bn of public funds dished out in lucrative contracts to favoured private companies (including chums of Government ministers) often without tender, hardly augurs well for the future.

"But surely", I hear you say, "the Labour Party, the founder of the NHS, will come to its rescue with all guns blazing to ensure that the electorate are made aware of what they're about to lose." You would certainly hope so. But, given Sir Keir's propensity to prioritise the gaining of 'respectability', to not be too beastly to a government that's proved to be very beastly, and to avoid getting on the wrong side of the overwhelmingly Tory-friendly press, it would be unwise to bank on it!

Henry Tiller

With thanks to Norma Dudley (Vice Chair of the Socialist Health Association, London Branch, and member of 'Keep our NHS Public') for her invaluable comments on the first 2 drafts of this article.

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