

# Labour's 2015 public health policy a curious egg

Labour's public health policy document *Protecting Children, Empowering all: Labour's New Approach to Public health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is disappointingly last century. George Lakoff's wonderful book *Don't Think of an Elephant! – Know your Values and frame the debate* warns against letting your opponents take control by using their own language and this is the trap into which Labour falls. The policy's title words 'empowering all' imply that the public health approach is individuals' improving their health by their own action. This also implies that individuals are to blame if their health doesn't improve, for example, by being continually physically inactive, even though it is our modern, technological society that has made it very difficult for children and adults to get exercise as part of daily living.

Of course the individual action is a part of public health, but only a small fraction: the main public health approach is through political and economic action by Government and local communities and by involving large national organisations.

This is because the main determinants of health are the economic and social situations of people within a society, which the vast majority of us are unable to change by our individual endeavours.

Further, the greater economic and social inequalities are in a society, the unhealthier the society is in relation to a comparable more egalitarian one.

**Therefore one main strand of public health policy must be to produce a more economically and socially egalitarian society.**

My main criticism of this Labour policy is that it emphasises individual action solutions and not society action via the

economic, social, educational and cultural arenas. Where it does mention Government action, it seems apologetic. And that's the point: Labour is on the defensive, not only against the Conservative agenda but also against New Labour policies.

**Changing economic and social policy arenas is the way to 'empower' individuals and families, by first working towards full employment and secondly by ensuring that all employed people have decent conditions of employment and, most important of all, a minimum healthy income.<sup>1</sup>**

Public health experts must be given power to make authoritative evidence the basis of all policies which affect health. Those policies will affect most sectors of the economy and society, for instance, obtaining healthier nutrition by regulating

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<sup>1</sup> Morris JN, Donkin AJ, Wonderling D, Wilkinson P, Dowler EA A minimum income for healthy living. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 2000;54(12):885-9

the retail trade's attempts to sell unhealthy amounts of salt, sugar and fats (the Labour policy does indeed suggest such regulation).

The document commendably states "The substantial gap between the health of the worst-off and the most prosperous in our society continues to be persist. The stark truth is that people living in the poorest neighbourhoods (sic) will on average die 7 years earlier than people living in the richest neighbourhoods.

**Where you live in modern Britain, what you earn and how long you stay in education, may still impact on your health.**

Left unchecked, these public health challenges will not only ruin the lives of individuals, they will also impose substantial costs on the health service and our wider economy."

Bafflingly, it does not make one policy suggestion to reduce economic inequalities, even though its own Sure Start programme was a useful initiative at the local level.

Most curious of all is that while it does state that "We will adopt the

internationally accepted 'Health in All Policies' approach – putting health concerns at the centre of our programme for government. Improving our health is not in the gift any one department, organisation or agency, it is the product of many separate policies and activities not just from government but in communities, schools, workplaces, businesses and homes across the country."

And "*Our clear ambition is to reduce health inequalities.*"

And "We will develop new measures for recommended levels of physical activity that can be easily understood by everyone, and are consistent across government, including a basic minimum that everyone who can should try to do, and also a recommended level that we should aspire to get at least 50 per cent of people achieving by 2025 as part of our new national ambition." pathetically there is not one word on how this will be done – no detail on any policies to achieve these aims.

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