

BURNHAM “PLEDGES”

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Shadow health secretary Andy Burnham says if the NHS bill is passed by this parliament, a Labour government, if re-elected, would pledge to repeal it. This opens a new front in the debate over the NHS's future.

Shadow health secretary Andy Burnham committed the Labour party to undoing the proposed radical reorganisation of the English NHS in a speech on Wednesday. "Labour will inherit a very different NHS – lots of damage will have already been done. And let me make it clear – if the bill in parliament goes through, we will repeal it", he told delegates at the Royal College of Midwives's annual conference in Brighton.

"We will return the NHS to a national system based on the principle of collaboration on which it was founded in 1948," added Burnham, who also emphasised that, in making that pledge he was "not talking about protecting the status quo".

His remarks are likely to be welcomed by medical organisations and campaigners against health secretary Andrew Lansley's planned legislation, which has been approved by the House of Commons and is currently in its committee stage in the House of Lords.

But a source close to Lansley claimed Burnham, Labour's last health secretary who returned to the shadow role in shadow cabinet reshuffle, was in effect proposing yet another restructuring of the NHS which staff would not support.

"Andy Burnham has shown his true colours. He wants to turn the clock back to 1948, destroying the progress that was made under Tony Blair and is committing the NHS to a costly reorganisation that no one will want," said the source. "He's rolling back the progress of the New Labour years by taking us back to a top-down, command and control NHS."

Talking to the Guardian after his speech Burnham said he was not proposing that a future Labour administration would unwind everything in the bill or try to return the NHS to its exact structure today. But would take decisive steps to undo the most damaging aspects of Lansley's plan, he said.

"While we would not leave in place a legislative framework that breaks up the NHS, nor would we lurch headlong into another NHS reorganisation.

"But we would reinstate the Secretary of State's powers [his duty to provide a comprehensive health service across England], remove the [planned] duty to promote autonomy of NHS organisations which is a red rag, a market-based system – and we would repeal all of the administrative stuff that creates the market [inside the NHS]."

He also said it was vital that in future NHS groups which commissioned health services for local populations shared the same geographical boundaries as one local council, in order to promote the smoothest possible integration of health and social care services. There is concern that some of the planned GP-led clinical commissioning groups will have patients who live in several local authority areas, which will make integration more difficult.

The NHS under Labour would replace Lansley's determination to make hospitals compete with each other with a legal duty to co-operate and collaborate, added Burnham.

"There are immediate things we would do to repeal stuff in the Bill but [then] work back to a one-NHS system, a collaborative system that's self-supporting. And we would remove the duty to pit one hospital against another."

Asked if he would scrap Lansley's planned policy of "any willing provider", under which private health providers and charities can win contracts to provide NHS services, Burnham replied that he still regarded the NHS as the "preferred provider" of state-funded health services – a stance he articulated during his time as health secretary during 2009-10.

But the source close to Lansley said that that policy had been discredited and that Burnham appeared to be suggesting removing competition and use of private providers, which were either introduced or increased during Labour's 13 years in office, from the NHS altogether.