The Health and Social Care Bill was intended to benefit frontline NHS staff

For students sitting their AS exams in the summer, the controversy over David Cameron’s plans for the NHS (the Health and Social Care Bill) offers an excellent case study across a range of topics.

For some, David Cameron’s plans to reform the NHS are reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher’s doomed ‘poll tax’. Cameron hoped opposition to his plans would disappear following the public pause in April 2011 to listen and reflect on criticism. If anything, opposition increased at the start of 2012.

Pressure groups and public opinion

In recent weeks the coalition’s reforms have faced a barrage of criticism from medical trade unions and professional bodies. The doctors’ trade union, the British Medical Association, has led the charge. Its chairman, Dr Hamish Meldrum, has argued that the reforms will ‘fragment and disrupt patient care’. Critics argue that ‘the Bill will lead to...increased health inequalities, more bureaucracy and wasted public funds’. This criticism from medical professionals is especially damaging for the government because the reforms have been presented from the start as benefiting frontline staff, especially GPs.

There has also been rising evidence of public opposition. By mid-February 2012 over 110,000 people had signed an e-petition calling for the bill to be dropped and polling evidence suggests widespread opposition. The NHS is sensitive territory for the Conservatives and public opinion matters.

Re-contaminating the Tories?

The Conservatives fought the 2010 election on the promise that the NHS was safe in Tory hands. The party felt that convincing the public it could be trusted on the NHS was crucial to winning the election. Cameron launched a major poster campaign in early 2010 stating ‘I’ll cut the deficit, not the NHS’. The manifesto promised no further ‘top-down’ reorganisations and NHS funding was specifically ring-fenced from cuts.

The worry in No 10 now is all this hard work may be undone by the reaction to the party’s NHS plans. During one recent prime minister’s questions (PMQs), Ed Miliband taunted Cameron with the line ‘you can’t
trust the Tories on the NHS’. Some insiders argue the issue is ‘re-contaminating’ the Tory brand. Certainly, Cameron has staked his own personal authority on the reforms and is being personally damaged by the ongoing crisis.

**Parliamentary scrutiny**

The bill has faced a torrid time in both chambers of Parliament. It was amended over 100 times in the House of Commons alone and in recent weeks the House of Lords has performed its scrutinising role by forcing dozens of additional amendments on the government. Moreover, the Health Select Committee produced a highly critical report in January arguing that the reforms were a ‘disruption and distraction’. This was especially damaging as the committee’s Conservative chairman, Stephen Dorrell, is an ex-secretary of state for health.

During PMQs recently Ed Miliband told Cameron that ‘you know, in your heart of hearts, this is a complete disaster, this bill’. Allegedly, one of Cameron’s advisers privately said that the health secretary, Andrew Lansley, should be ‘taken out and shot’ for botching the reforms. Arguably, even if the bill survives it will have been so dramatically amended it will bear little resemblance to the original ‘Lansley plan’.

**Coalition and cabinet divisions**

The voice of the Tory grassroots, Conservativehome.com, reported in early February that three unnamed cabinet ministers were calling for Lansley to be removed. Many senior Tories believe the issue could cost the Tories seats at the next election (and potentially an outright majority).

There are also increasing signs of tension within the coalition more generally. After rejecting the NHS plan at their 2011 Spring Conference, recent criticism from leading Liberal Democrats has allowed the junior coalition party to further differentiate itself from its Tory partner. However, this has increased the sense on the Tory benches that the Lib Dems are not to be trusted.

The bill has been described as an ‘unexploded bomb’ underneath the Tories by leading commentator, Tim Montgomerie. The issue has become whether Cameron can defuse the bomb in the next few weeks and avoid a latter-day poll tax disaster.

**Activities**

1. Research ‘NHS reform’. Jot down three arguments for and three arguments against the government’s plans for reform.
2. Follow this issue between now and your exams. Keep a log of any further developments relevant to your AS papers. Think how the issue can be used in questions covering each of the AS topics.

**Weblinks to follow up**

Radio 4 clip on NHS reform: [www.tinyurl.com/7zet8hv](http://www.tinyurl.com/7zet8hv)

Telegraph article on the risks of the reforms: [www.tinyurl.com/7kuxbow](http://www.tinyurl.com/7kuxbow)

Why David Cameron can’t abandon the bill: [www.tinyurl.com/7e46kre](http://www.tinyurl.com/7e46kre)