On the other hand... [1]

Written by **Tom Clougherty** [2] | Wednesday 23 January 2008

I share Madsen's disappointment with Nick Clegg's refusal to back a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty (or EU Constitution, as honest people call it). Internationalism may be an important part of the Lib Dem creed, but there isn't much in the treaty that I would describe as 'liberal'. And it's strange that while the Lib Dems rightly back devolving more power to local government and individuals, they also support giving Brussels ever greater control over our lives and the policies that affect them.

On the other hand, Nick Clegg also made [3] a very promising announcement on the future of the NHS yesterday, saying he would replace central government targets with 'personal entitlement's to high-quality care. A 'patient contract' would guarantee service and give people the right to private treatment if maximum waiting times are exceeded. As he put it [4] in a *Telegraph* article, "That's how it works in Denmark ? not to undermine the public system, but to guarantee individual care."

Quite so. Public services, in a sense, represent a contract with the public. In return for paying taxes, you are entitled to certain services. The trouble now is that the contract is neither explicit nor enforceable. If you get shoddy service in the public sector, there is not much you can do about it. You are certainly not going to get your money back. An enforceable patient contract, with an escape mechanism to the private sector, changes things. It ensures a high level of service for the individual, and it forces the public sector to raise its game.

Of course, we have been advocating this kind of thing for years (see Blueprint for a Revolution [5], for example) but it's always nice when politicians realise you are right. David Laws MP, the man in charge of Lib Dem public service reform policy, has promised radical thinking across the board, so let's hope there is more of this to come...

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