

## **Gesundheit!**

Finally, some good news for the NHS - the German health system is in crisis too.

It's funny, because normally everything in Germany is better than over here. Their beer's cheaper, their porn's more hardcore, their trains run on time, their car firms buy ours, their capital has a gay mayor, and their waiters don't mind parties of 20 paying individually. Their chancellor even has a full head of hair (compare Tony's greying stress-ravaged barnet) and enough self-assurance to stand up to George W. on Iraq. How could things go wrong?

But go wrong they have, and New Labour could do well to pick up on some of the parallels. After all, the current SPD government, a nominally socialist party fronted by an energetic new leader with a grinning wife, came into power in a surge thanks to the unpopularity and corruption of the ruling conservative CDU, and then traded on some attempted populist policies to try and prove how different they were from the last lot. If that's not sounding familiar already, just compare the names of each side's favourite bugbear: Roland Koch - Robin Cook - Robin Cook - Roland Koch. Scary, ain't it?

However, up until the health reforms Gerhard Schröder was doing more or less OK. Admittedly, Saxon metalworkers have kept striking, plans for a motorway tax have floundered, financial scandal has hit Mannesman, unemployment has reached new highs, students have held prolonged protests over funding cuts and the entire city of Berlin has gone bankrupt, but nothing has really shaken the Bouffant Chancellor's position. His pet project, Agenda 2010, even had the ever-popular aim of reducing taxes by making public spending more efficient (how did they come up with that one?). Unfortunately, the first step in this plan was reforming the health system.

In principle, it could have been a good thing. The German system works on a compulsory contribution model, with private insurance companies (*Krankenkassen*) deducting premiums from wages and then paying up for most medical expenses. To stop premiums soaring, as they have been for some years, Schröder wanted to shift some of the burden off the insurers by reducing exemptions from payment, introducing a flat-rate charge for consultations (like the prescription fee here) and cutting down on unnecessary expenses like taxi fares for non-urgent patients.

As Blair & Co doubtless could have told him, the worst thing you can do with a major reform, especially when it affects those pesky ordinary people who vote for you, is roll it out before it's been fully completed, appraised and agreed. Apparently, though, the phrase 'the devil is in the details' has no German equivalent, and the health reform that hit the statute books in January was a vague, inconsistent, unfair, slapdash disaster.

Among the many complainants were women using the Pill, who would now have to pay a consultation fee every 3 months; wheelchair users, who would now have to pay for their own taxis to hospital; cancer and AIDS patients, who were left not knowing if they were sufficiently 'severe cases' to be exempt from payments; and those in residential homes, who faced having to pay lump-sum yearly charges that

exceed their monthly allowance. In fact, no-one, anywhere, was happy with anything about the reform.

Faced with the most hated measure since the Berlin Wall, the backbiting and scapegoating has been astounding even by British standards. The medical consultants blame the Krankenkassen, the Krankenkassen blame the politicians, the opposition (who agreed to the bill) blame the government, and health minister Ulla Schmidt has achieved a level of national unpopularity that even Cook and Koch could only dream of. Retrospective changes have resolved some of the key problems, but a political bloodbath seems inevitable.

Most worryingly for the government, the CDU won the Hamburg city elections by an unprecedented landslide in February, a serious reversal in a staunch SPD area and directly attributable to the reform fiasco. With both presidential and national elections due in the next two years, Schröder will need to pull something pretty special out of the bag to avoid going the way of José Maria Aznar. German troops could well be home from Iraq sooner than they expect...

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