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US Threat To NHS Comes Closer

The upcoming start of formal negotiations for a US-EU trade deal is causing increasing concern among opponents of NHS privatisation. The former doctor and Foreign Secretary Lord Owen has recently warned of an “alarming prospect” for the English health service.

Prime Minister David Cameron has been heavily promoting the start of negotiations – due to coincide with the G8 summit which he is hosting in Northern Ireland on June 17. Opening up European services to American corporations is high on the negotiators’ agenda.

Writing on the Our NHS website, Lord Owen warned of “the alarming prospect of investment protection being extended to the whole raft of private health contracts in the UK that American health care companies and consultancies expect to be awarded to them in the next few years.

“Such protection could have the effect of health contracts being virtually retained in perpetuity with no democratic right for an incoming government to discontinue the contracts once their term had expired without being able to prove gross negligence and risking very heavy compensation payments.”

A US-EU deal has been the aim of trade officials for several years as a way of bypassing the deadlocked Doha round of global trade talks. Researcher Linda Kaucher reports being present at a meeting in Brussels in 2010 in which staff of the EU’s trade commission were talking up a deal.

Kaucher says the officials put health at the top of the list of sectors that Europe would have to “harmonise” with the American market system in order for the talks to proceed. Plans to turn the English NHS into a fully market-based system quickly followed from the Coalition Government.

Cameron leads the way

Health is likely to be excluded from parallel discussions of a Canada-EU trade deal, but David Cameron emphasised this month during his visit to Washington that there would be “no exceptions” in the EU-US talks. The insistence on “no exceptions” could stall the negotiations because France is anxious that the European film industry should be protected from US rivals.

US trade officials are hoping that the deal will be wrapped up by 2015, but there is plenty of opportunity for it to founder, right up a final vote by the European Parliament. With European issues in the spotlight in the UK, the role of EU trade negotiators in privatising the NHS deserves to be publicised.

In the recent Lords debate over new NHS regulations, Lib Dems were regretfully emphasising that competitive tendering was required because European procurement law demanded this. How strange, that the Coalition is at the same time actively promoting a far more draconian international regime for the health service.

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It is hard to imagine why MPs or peers would want the English system to get closer to the American model - where people get sick and die without medical treatment if they lack a way of paying for it. One explanation of politicians' motives comes from the Social Investigations research team, who say: "Over 200 parliamentarians have recent past or present financial links to companies involved in healthcare."