Offline: The hottest date in town

Whatever happened to public health in Britain? It used to be a great reformist social movement that spoke up for the poor and vulnerable, challenged the political classes, and campaigned for a fairer society. That was in the 19th century. Today it is about managing budgets, colluding with ministers, and avoiding conflict. So the election of a new President of the Faculty of Public Health is an occasion to measure the vitality of the movement. Seven candidates are standing. Their manifestos are full of promises that are surprisingly inward-looking: creating a Royal College, being protectively diplomatic, and building toolkits. A few candidates mention advocacy, almost apologetically. A couple add in climate change. One is committed to complementary medicine. There is little fire. No Edwin Chadwick for the 21st century. But one candidate does stand out. He writes about changing the world, being passionate and idealistic, and tackling the “misery of recession”. He emphasises public health’s role in the “crises of economics, of alienation”. He seems ready to strike a match for a renewed public health movement. The ballot ends on Jan 22.

Conflict of interest: I am half Norwegian. One of the most important ideas to emerge from Norway’s first Stoltenberg Government 2 years ago was health as a foreign policy issue. The other half of me—English—was hopeful that Britain’s Labour Government would live up to Robin Cook’s 1997 commitment to adopt “an ethical dimension” to its foreign policy. But then came Iraq, and now Afghanistan. Ethics burned on the funeral pyre of expediency. Where Britain left off, Norway continued. The 2007 Oslo Declaration promised that Norway—and Brazil, France, Indonesia, Senegal, South Africa, and Thailand—would broaden the scope of its foreign policy to include health. Norway’s huge financial contribution to the health-related Millennium Development Goals is proof of its serious intent. Influential and experienced health ambassadors—Tore Godal and Sigrun Møgedal—sit at the right hands of the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, respectively. Under a second Stoltenberg term, Norway has recommitted itself to health as a critical tool for, and outcome of, foreign policy. Norway is a small country. But it has big ideas.

How bad is the economic crisis going to get for health? WHO has concluded that “a grave human crisis is already happening”. For some, this is certainly true. But as a recent seminar at King’s College, Cambridge—led by Emma Rothschild, Professor of History at Harvard—concluded, past economic crises show that the true picture is likely to be more complex. The intersection between health and economic history is producing a new discipline for our times. Not a moment too soon. We need to learn lessons from past economic upheavals for donor aid, vertical health programmes, multilateral health institutions, civil society, foundations, and research. One lesson surely is that the effects of financial shocks are not only financial. They are systemic—with political, social, cultural, and even psychological consequences. But there are also more fundamental questions. What do we mean by crisis? Can a particular type of political system protect against economic hardship? Could this current crisis be a catalyst for new ways of strengthening health? Emma Rothschild’s initiative will continue over the next year with research and symposia on different continents. Her findings will be important.

The Nuffield Trust is the hottest date in town, according to its Director, Jennifer Dixon. Under new leadership for a year now, the Trust is reinventing itself as one of the leading health policy think-tanks in the UK. Prospects look good. An election year in Britain at a time of sharp financial cutbacks means that new ideas are urgently needed. Often an irritation to government, think-tanks should now be sources of welcome and creative invention. As far as National Health Service stewardship goes, the Department of Health is widely recognised as a sink of disappointment. Meanwhile, the Trust’s rival, the King’s Fund, is itself facing a change of leadership at the most interesting political moment for a decade. Niall Dickson, who excelled at projecting the Fund into the public eye, has now moved into the dark and sepulchral halls of the General Medical Council. Chris Ham takes his place later this year. 2010 is the Nuffield Trust’s moment of opportunity.

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