

NHS Reform 5 - what is the meaning of the delay?

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I spent some time in the company of doctors at the weekend, as is often my habit.

Several asked me why the government has announced a delay in the legislation to privatise the NHS because as they're seeing on the ground, nothing is changing there. The pace of change, all of it involving illegal spending without legislative backing, is preceding apace, but the talk in politics is of a three month moratorium. What did I think was happening, they asked?

My explanation is a relatively simple one. I don't think the Tories have changed any of their thinking. I think they're still planning to push the whole package through. The three month delay means though that the story falls out of the media until early July - and then it's almost the long recess and then it's summer. September is conference season and with luck what the Tories hope is that with the story out of the limelight between now and then everyone will have forgotten it by early autumn.

Then they come back in October to Westminster and it will be only weeks until the session is over - so it will be massive stress and guillotines all round to try to force it through with minimum time in the press.

It's a massive gamble on their part, but that's what I think the plan is - they want to play brinksmanship to get their Act in October - and they believe they can beat the LibDems into submission then.

But in the meantime with the extraordinary arrogance they reveal by the day they're treating it as a done deal. Actually there's six months to go - and that's a massive opportunity to effect change.

My judgement? I think they've called this wrong. But maybe that's wishful thinking.