

Funding the Future

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I have worked with Green MP Caroline Lucas on a number of projects since she went to Westminster in 2010. I have no involvement in her latest Private Member's Bill but warmly welcome it and so reproduce the press release that accompanied its promotion yesterday:

Caroline Lucas, the Green MP for Brighton Pavilion, is launching a new bill as part of a campaign to give people more control over public services.

Her Private Member's Bill is based on work by We Own It, which campaigns to shift the debate on public ownership, and to show that public services are better in public hands.

The Bill, to be presented in Parliament this week, would make public ownership the default option before privatisation takes place, and ensure private companies running services are more accountable and transparent. It would cover a range of services, including the NHS, public transport, and local services such as schools and libraries.

It would:

- * Make public ownership the default option before any services, national or local, are contracted out to the private sector
- * Require there to be a realistic and thorough in-house bid whenever a service is put out to tender
- * Ensure there is full consideration of public opinion before any service is privatised or outsourced
- * Give the public a right to recall private companies running public services poorly
- * Require private companies running public services to be transparent about their performance and financial data (as in the public sector)
- * Make private companies running public services subject to Freedom of Information requests (as in the public sector)
- * Give social enterprises and mutuals, as well as public sector organisations, priority in tendering processes

Caroline Lucas, MP for Brighton Pavilion, said:

Whether it's the NHS, railways or schools, people deserve reliable, cost-effective, and accountable public services.

Since the 1980s we've seen more and more areas of public life put up for sale, with money diverted from services to shareholders. In Brighton and across the country, people are increasingly questioning the tired 'Private is Best' myth.

There are positive, pragmatic alternatives. When services are owned by the people who rely on them, there is more accountability, more democracy, and the knowledge that profits aren't ending up in the pockets of big business.

Increasingly we're seeing different ways public ownership can deliver high-quality, cost-efficient services. The publicly owned East Coast line, for example, delivered over £200 million back to the taxpayer last year.

Councils are starting to bring services back in house — not because of dogma, but because it's more cost-efficient.

This Bill is about improving the quality and accountability of the services we all rely on. It's supported by public opinion and I hope other MPs can get behind it.

The We Own It campaign was set up last year to highlight the benefits of public ownership. Last year it carried out polling which showed that:

- * 60% of the public support public ownership being a default option before services are contracted out
- * 79% believe the public should be consulted before any service is privatised or outsourced
- * 88% believe there should be a right to recall private companies doing a bad job
- * 88% believe private companies running public services should be transparent about their performance and financial data
- * 48% mistakenly believe that private companies running public services are already subject to Freedom of Information Legislation

Cat Hobbs, Founder of We Own It, said:

It's brilliant that Caroline Lucas is taking a stand for the people who use public services. Public ownership is popular, and people are sick of the endless stream of sell-offs and outsourcing deals. This Bill would give all of us a real say over what happens to OUR public services. Privatisation has failed and now we need openness, transparency and accountability. All parties need to get behind the Public Service Users Bill and stand up for the rights of ordinary people, not dodgy outsourcing giants.

The Bill is already supported by Labour MPs Katy Clark, Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell and Grahame Morris, Liberal Democrat John Leech, and Elfyn Llwyd of Plaid Cymru.

Caroline has already tabled a Private Member's Bill to bring the railways back into public ownership, and campaigns for a publicly provided, publicly funded NHS.