

COSTING THE POOR AN ARM AND A LEG



NOT too long ago some transplant surgeons in America came up with a bright idea, they knew that the health service in the US was creaking at the seams and that the poorest 30% of the population received no health care at all. They I also knew that the Bush administration was not going to raise taxes to pay for a decent health care system. So their bright idea appealed directly to the magic of the market - the poor could pay for their health care treatment by selling one of their paired organs to the hospital.

A kidney, an eye, an ear, arm, leg, testicle, toe or lung could fetch a tidy price on the transplant market You could buy a lot of health care treatment for yourself in exchange. And it was, after all, for something you could learn to live without It could pay for your child to go through college, set you up in a house of your own, meet the costs of

residential care that your parents needed.

Americans didn't find too much of an ethical problem about this. They already had a private market in which people sold their blood to whoever would buy and there was growing evidence of people from Central and South America already selling parts of their bodies to private hospitals. But the idea went down badly in Britain. We, after all, had a national health service - available to all, free at the point of need.

How things change. We now hear scare stories going around that the Government is going to charge patients for receiving 'hotel' services in hospitals; that they might charge patients for the length of time they occupy a bed - a real 'get well soon' message, that one.

IT will be a summer of glorious speculative ideas for the Tory free marketeers; a summer in which the phrase 'active citizenship' is bound to raise its head as a ploy for the Government to make public expenditure costs. It could demand that" the sick want to be sick, at least they could clean the hospitals while they're there. If women want to have children then they can jolly well turn into school to do a bit of teaching. If the old insist on growing old, then the least they could do is cook each other meals. And all those unemployed? Who better to pick up the litter that the rest of us discard? Perhaps they could even buy a train that's being flogged off, and make themselves more mobile in the jobs market?

Most of the ideas that will be floated over the summer will be as daft as this. Many will be downright frightening. But all of them will be designed to soften us up for another dose of bitter medicine in the Government's autumn budget.

Just pause for a minute and ask yourself some different questions. If Britain has become so much more productive and prosperous under Tory rule, how come we can't afford the decent services we established in 1945, when the country was so poor? After the war we mobilised people to build houses. Britain set up the NHS, introduced a comprehensive scheme for pensions and national insurance;

guaranteed the right to education to all our children. It was a time when we borrowed to build, not to bribe. It was also a time when we had a different view of taxation - the simpler, fairer, belief that you paid tax in accordance with what you earned. Those who received most contributed most.

NOW, the top 3% of people in Britain earn over £42 billion a year. Many pay little or no tax through the use of (legal) fiddles. The pay increases they have awarded themselves have looked exorbitant - 160% for the head of National Power, 60% for the boss of McAlpines, 64% for Lord King (British Airways). When you consider their starting pay levels - the boss of the Royal Bank of Scotland will get £10 million this year - then you are talking about telephone number figures, not loose change.

Meanwhile, workers in public services will get a 1.5% rise. Some have even taken a pay cut to stay in work. They are being asked to do more and to be paid less. As the gap between the rich and the rest in Britain grows ever wider, it is worth noticing that it will be the rich who will be the most conspicuous group not to be asked to feel the pinch of government cuts.

It will be the poor who will be asked to pay for their own poverty and to provide their own services while the free lunches in the City roll on and on.

Is it simply an expression of human nature, or a time to really question what we do with what we have?