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NHS plans are safe, Lansley tells Tories

Government moves to reassure right ahead of new deal on health bill

Nicholas Watt
Chief political correspondent

Andrew Lansley, the health secretary, yesterday issued a private plea to angry Conservative MPs to stand by him as he prepares to push through a heavily amended version of his NHS reforms.

The government will today accept a series of changes proposed by an independent panel. But amid anger on the Tory benches at Liberal Democrat claims that they have secured a major victory by forcing Lansley to back down, the health secretary has told Tory MPs that the core principles of his reforms will remain in place.

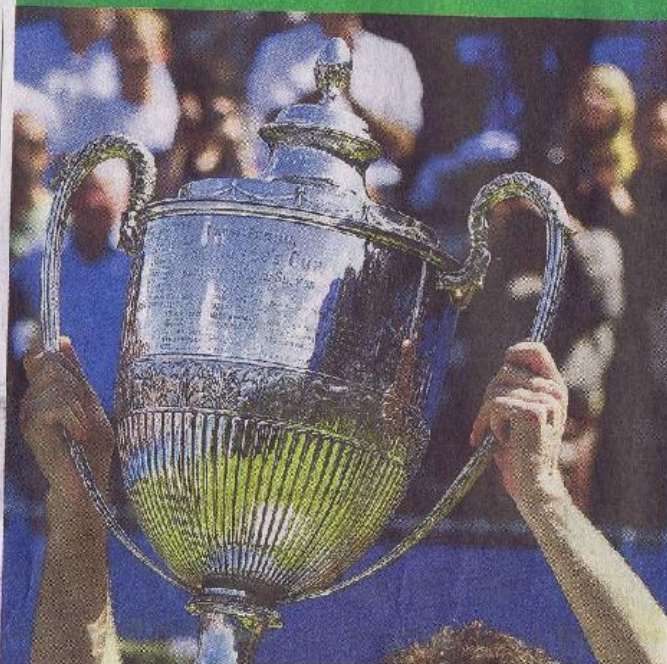
on their full range of responsibilities when they can demonstrate that they have the right skills, capacity and capability to do so".

Private providers should not be allowed to "cherry pick" patients and the government "should not seek to increase the role of the private sector as an end in itself".

The health secretary "must remain ultimately accountable" for the NHS, in contrast to Lansley's original proposal in the bill which made him mainly responsible for the promotion of public health.

In a letter to ministers, Field said the government had slipped up in its original plans. "We heard genuine and deep seated concerns from NHS staff, patients and the

Murray wins grass court title in London ... no, not that one (yet)



Navy chief's warning over scale of Libya mission

Nick Hopkins

The head of the Royal Navy has warned that the fleet will not be able to continue the current scale of operations around Libya beyond the summer unless ministers take tough decisions about what they want to prioritise.

Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope, the first sea lord, said the navy had planned for a six-month commitment but that the government would have to make "challenging decisions" about what it wanted to do thereafter.

Stanhope also conceded that if the aircraft carrier Ark Royal and its Harrier jump jets had not been mothballed last year, they would have been deployed to the Mediterranean.

This would have been cheaper - and made operations more reactive - than flying planes from the Italian base at Gioia del Colle, he said. But he insisted the constant jibes about the loss of the ship and the aircraft were having a "corrosive" effect on

Big names move into retail park spaces left empty by collapsed chains

Julia Kollewe

The vacancy rate in out-of-town shops has fallen to the lowest in three years, as traditional high-street retailers such as Argos and Next, along with budget chains, snap up empty stores in retail parks and expand outside town centres.

A report from the retail consultants Trevor Wood Associates shows that supermarkets are also among those moving into the stores vacated by retailers that have collapsed into administration, such as the 178-strong DIY chain Focus. JJB Sports has staved off collapse by entering into a company voluntary arrangement but it is shutting up to 90 shops over the next two years.

This is providing rich pickings for supermarkets and other retailers, which are now

moving into high-ceilinged retail sheds they would previously have spurned.

Marks & Spencer Simply Food has moved into the former JJB store in Cambridge and the former Borders books outlet in Newbury, while Tesco has gobbled up Focus stores in Bromley and Crowborough, and Asda has recently bought six Focus outlets.

The discount chain B&M, which recently bought 11 Focus stores, is the fastest growing among the top 30 retail park tenants, having increased its floor space by 33% over the past year.

While the high street struggles, out-of-town shopping remains popular, said Trevor Wood, senior partner of the firm behind the research.

"Out of town is supplying what the public wants: ease of access, car parking. Mum can go to Next while dad goes to B&Q and



Out-of-town centres such as Bluewater, in Kent, have seen vacancy rates fall

there is Pets at Home or Toys R Us for the kids," he said.

The vacancy rate in out-of-town retail parks dropped to 9.2% by the end of 2010, from 11.6% in 2009. This is the lowest since the 8.3% recorded before the recession, at the end of 2007, and compares with an average vacancy rate of 15% on the high street. That figure, from the Local Data Company, takes into account every high street in the UK.

But Wood does not believe the high street is dead. "The high street needs slight invigorating. If you provide ease of access, free parking and the right type of stores, it might be turned around. But a lot of councils are imposing punitive car parking charges."

He also sees potential for "hybrid developments": retail parks built on the edge of town centres, next to high street shops.