

Sir,

I wasn't entirely surprised to read the Labour Parliamentary Candidate's letter to the Welwyn Hatfield Times in which she wrongly claimed that we were robbed of our QE2 Hospital by this government. After all, Ms Newbigging wasn't here at the time and still lives in Bedford today. I thought it might therefore be helpful to fill in Labour's candidate, about the huge political scandal that surrounded the disgracefully downgrading of our hospital.

Back when this was a Labour-held seat, then Chancellor Gordon Brown turned up to announce that a new £550m super-hospital would be built in Hatfield. This was great news and we all celebrated. Sadly, the moment Labour's MP, Melanie Johnson, lost this seat the pledge to build that super-hospital entirely disappeared, despite Labour still being in power nationally. Later, with Gordon Brown as Prime Minister, a consultation was launched to merge the QE2 and the Lister in Stevenage onto one site. Incredibly, despite two-thirds of people calling for the QE2 to become that major hospital – due to its central Hertfordshire location – the then Labour government chose the Lister in Stevenage instead.

Of course, at the time Stevenage was still a marginal Labour seat and so this decision felt rather political. Soon gerrymandering suspicions were confirmed with The Times newspaper publishing secret correspondence, inadvertently left on House of Commons photocopier, revealing that Labour 'manipulated' hospital closures. The paper reported, 'A secret meeting has been held by ministers and Labour Party officials to work out ways of closing hospitals without jeopardising key marginal seats.'

These emails showed that the then health secretary Patricia Hewitt 'called for those at the meeting to be provided with 'heat maps', showing marginal Labour seats where closures or reconfigurations of health services could cost votes.' And that is the disgraceful truth behind Welwyn Hatfield losing its much-loved and needed District Hospital.

By the time the Coalition government came to power hundreds-of-millions of pounds had already been spent on getting the Lister in Stevenage ready. There was no way to stop the downgrade, without creating an enormous and expensive 'white elephant'.

Although this is a widely known political scandal here in Welwyn Hatfield, I accept it probably didn't make the news in Bedford. I can however assure Ms Newbigging that local people have never ever forgotten this enormous betrayal. And we never will. As a long-term healthcare campaigner and someone who has had their life saved by the NHS, I am delighted to debate healthcare with Labour's latest candidate. However, it is important that we start by knowing the facts.

Yours,
Grant Shapps MP