

UK Leave and Remain campaigns seek to exploit fears over future of National Health Service

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Vote Leave, the official campaign in favour of Britain leaving the European Union (EU) in the upcoming referendum, has unveiled its first billboard poster. “Let’s give our NHS the £350 million the EU takes every week,” it declared.

Labour Party MP Graham Stringer, a Vote Leave board member, said, “If we take back control of our borders, democracy and economy on 23 June we can ensure that the UK and our health service prospers for this and future generations.”

The anti-EU sections of the Conservative Party have suddenly discovered their “opposition” to the underfunding of the National Health Service (NHS), and even to the attack by the government on junior doctors, in order to disguise their right-wing programme of economic nationalism and more anti-immigrant measures.

As for the Remain camp, Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt had the effrontery to warn that a British withdrawal from the EU would create a staffing crisis in the NHS by jeopardising the status of 100,000 EU workers who help to sustain the UK’s health and social care system. This is from a government that is imposing a contract on 55,000 junior doctors in England that slashes pay and removes existing safeguards against excessive hours, risking driving many from the public sector or abroad, and which has just removed bursaries for trainee nurses.

The Vote Leave campaign is using the most inflammatory language in seeking to deflect opposition to the destruction of the NHS in an anti-immigrant direction. Boris Johnson, Conservative London mayor, declared, “We get uncontrolled immigration, which puts unsustainable pressure on our vital public

services.”

Professor Angus Dagleish, a principal of the Vaccine Institute and UK Independence Party candidate in last year’s general election, was quoted in the right-wing *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail* claiming that the NHS is being “bled dry” by European migrants. Dagleish has criticised the government for not including restrictions on access to the NHS within its measures denying welfare benefits to EU migrants.

Matthew Elliott, chief executive of Vote Leave, is co-founder of the lobby group, the Tax Payers Alliance, which advocates the replacement of the NHS with a contributions-based insurance system.

The fear whipped up over “health tourism,” which is a centrepiece of the Vote Leave campaign, in fact formed the basis for measures introduced by the government in April 2015 imposing a health surcharge. Applied to all non-European Economic Area (EEA) temporary migrants remaining more than six months, the surcharge came to £200 and £150 for students. It has created a precedent that attacks a cornerstone of the NHS—health care that is free at the point of use. Non-EEA temporary migrants who are working end up paying twice, through taxation on their wages and the upfront charge.

The measure has far greater political significance than the negligible amount it stands to generate—less than 1 percent of the annual NHS budget. It is a policy of divide and rule in the face of the biggest spending squeeze in the history of the NHS. The toxic atmosphere it creates provides the pretext for extending charges more widely against those branded undeserving or a drain on limited resources.

The limited disclosures contained within the “Panama

Papers” have revealed the real source of the crisis facing the NHS by exposing how the financial elite stash their wealth in offshore tax havens. Based on the figures from the government in 2011-2012, it is estimated that the unpaid tax bill by corporations and businesses in the UK amounted to £35 billion. This equates to the lion’s share of the cuts to the NHS budget made from 2010 to 2020.

Research demonstrates that EU migrants are in fact net contributors to the NHS. They consist of a younger demographic with less need to access health care. Moreover, the fifth largest employer in the world, the NHS is dependent on health professionals drawn from around the world. Of those who provide the public with treatment on a daily basis, 30 percent of doctors and 40 percent of nurses were born abroad.

Vote Leave’s claim that withdrawal from the EU will provide £350 million by redirecting the present UK contribution sent to Brussels is a lie. Even the figure is false, as it does not include the rebate the UK receives, which brings it nearer to £276 million. But more importantly, the idea that this would be used to shower the NHS with an additional £18 billion annually is nonsense.

In addition to never-ending budget cuts, the NHS has been used as a milch cow by private corporations through policies such as the Private Finance Initiative.

Under these conditions, Lord David Owen, a leading Liberal Democrat in the Vote Leave campaign, has linked the call to quit the EU with opposition to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)—the US-EU trade deal currently under negotiation that will accelerate the process of privatisation already taking place. But even as he did so, he felt obliged to make clear that he was not in fact opposed to privatisation!

“We agreed in Vote Leave that, whatever our political views on the present marketisation of the NHS, decisions on the NHS should for the future be for the UK parliament and devolved administrations to take,” he said. “It should not be for the European commission nor the European parliament.”

The invocation of national sovereignty as representing the will of the people is belied by the fact that the British parliament is no less an instrument of the financial elite than the EU apparatus in Brussels. The Health and Social Care Act 2012, the largest single

piece of legislation aimed at privatising the NHS, did not appear in the manifesto of either the Liberal Democrats or Conservative Party in the 2010 general election. Owen now cynically poses as a defender of the NHS by calling for the repeal of sections of this legislation, such as restoring the responsibility of the secretary of health to “provide” rather than “arrange” health provision.

The greatest danger is posed by the fact that it is those advocating xenophobia and anti-immigrant hysteria who now talk about a crisis in the NHS. With the Tory government wracked by internal divisions over Europe and confronting mounting social anger against cuts and attacks on junior doctors, it is left to the Labour Party and trade unions to make the case for the Remain campaign. Their support for the EU paints a picture of economic prosperity and investment, which is totally at odds with social reality in Britain and throughout Europe.

Four of the former health secretaries in the Labour government of 1997 to 2010 wrote a letter to the *Guardian* to declare, “Brexit would mean less money for the NHS.” It warned that continued investment in the NHS (!) “is now under threat. The economic implications of Britain leaving Europe would be felt at the heart of our cherished national institution.”

With regard to the Leave campaign, it states, “These are the same people who have campaigned for increased NHS charging; increased privatisation; and cuts to spending. People should not trust their motives or their maths.”

However, this is an equally apt description not just of the Cameron government and its health secretary, Jeremy Hunt, but of the letter’s signatories—Alan Milburn, Patricia Hewitt, Andy Burnham and Alan Johnson. It was under Labour that entry points were first opened up for private companies to provide NHS-funded clinical treatment and the first round of £20 billion worth of cuts implemented by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition were initiated.



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