

Daily Telegraph rails against socialist revival due to coronavirus crisis

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Boris Johnson's Conservative government is engaged in a massive public relations exercise to obscure the impact of weeks of inaction over the COVID-19 pandemic and austerity measures that have devastated the UK's National Health Service (NHS).

This political fraud is made necessary because of growing anger among millions of workers at the baleful indifference to their dire circumstances displayed by a government that has just handed £350 billion in loan guarantees to the corporations and banks. It was epitomised by Johnson's recent declaration, "One thing I think the coronavirus crisis has already proved is that there really is such a thing as society."

Even as he cynically contradicted Margaret Thatcher's infamous dictum that "There is no such thing as society," Johnson continues her policies of funnelling social wealth to the super-rich. If anyone wishes to know what the Tory Party is really thinking and planning, there is no better place to look than the editorial and op-ed pages of the *Daily Telegraph*—for which Johnson was, until becoming prime minister, an exceedingly well-paid columnist.

Like the rest of the media, the *Telegraph* welcomed Johnson's bailout of big business—so that columnist Tom Harris wrote, "There is no alternative: we are all socialists now in the fight against coronavirus."

He compared the response to the 2008 crash, when "Extraordinary amounts of public money were handed over to institutions whose bosses were too incompetent and too greedy to have managed them properly." To which he responded, "Given the unprecedented damage about to be wrought on our economy today, the self-imposed restrictions of party-political ideology hardly matter."

Former Tory Party leader William Hague commented March 24, "As in war, the need to defend the whole of society justifies state interventions that would otherwise be indefensible." But he made sure to warn, "For radical socialists, the proof that the state can take over paying wages, direct vital businesses and create money without restraint will be a justification for decades to come of ideas in which they have always believed."

His answer was to end state intervention as soon as possible. Drawing on his less than stellar grasp of history, he tried to comfort his readers with an analogy: "In the late 1940s, after

the trauma of war, ideas of state planning and the continuation of wartime controls were predominant in Britain and much of Europe. By 1951, the winning slogan of a returning Churchill was 'Set the People Free'. In these dark days, that is an objective that must always remain our inspiration."

To many within the *Telegraph's* editorial office, Hague's timetable for a reversion to naked plunder, courtesy of the "free market," is too complacent by far.

The "socialism" hailed by Harris, a former Labour MP turned Tory Brexiteer, is nothing of the sort. The only thing being "socialised" are the accumulated losses of the capitalists. The only thing being "expropriated" are the savings, jobs and wages of the working class.

But that does not mean the ruling elite are not worried by such a manifest failure of capitalism as that revealed by the coronavirus crisis. Economist Julian Jessop wrote on March 22 that state intervention was essential. Even "cleverly designed" wage subsidies are "bearable" and "not actually a huge amount in the grander scheme of the public finances." But his concern was that this not "signal a socialist state." The worry is "how this will all end. Given how popular it is to blame capitalism for the world's ills, from wars to climate change, it is no surprise that some have pinned the current crisis on the failures of free markets. Many have used the need for unprecedented intervention as evidence that the state should play a much bigger part in normal times."

Jeremy Warner, on March 27, urges his well-heeled readers to recognise the opportunities for capital provided by the crisis: "Dig down, and you find plenty of reasons to think that putting the economy into a medically induced coma, provided it doesn't go on for too long—which it can't, because public toleration is bound to be time limited—was not just unavoidable, but could ultimately prove powerfully beneficial."

A decade of "economic torpor, in which productivity and wages have gone nowhere" demonstrates that "The economy was already falling off a cliff from well before the lockdown came into force." Therefore, "The costs to the public purse may look staggeringly high, but in truth they are of no great significance in the long term." Moreover, "A short, sharp recession might also achieve its natural Darwinian purpose of clearing out zombified dead wood from the economy ..."

But he too had warned earlier, March 18, that whereas the early stages of the crisis had given rise to “a more caring, sharing, all-in-it-together mentality ... we are also likely to see a decisive shift Leftward and a more intolerant attitude to excess and inequality in all its various forms. Egregious levels of executive pay will be widely challenged as the new collectivism takes hold ... The measures now being adopted to underwrite firms and livelihoods will come at a price ...”

Tim Stanley was more incensed, writing March 23 that “last week, classical liberalism walked into the library with a loaded revolver. It hasn’t been seen since. Boris Johnson, who we all thought was a libertarian, has signed off on something akin to war communism.”

He warned that following the end of the Second World War, “It took us 40-odd years to roll back the state (an effort for which we have to thank classical liberals like Margaret Thatcher). Having created these mechanisms for fighting the virus—and having admitted that, yes, if a society wants to do something badly enough, the money is there to do it—won’t people say that the next task is to fight inequality or global warming?”

Camilla Tominey wrote March 27, “This crisis has barely started, but the new political battle lines for a post-coronavirus world are already being drawn... Whatever condition the NHS is left in at the end of this nightmare, the Left is going to try to make it impossible to argue for anything other than ever increasing spending ... The old slogan ‘Tory cuts cost lives’ will return in a new context, used to attack everything from proposals to reduce taxation to plans to reform public services.”

She concludes with the prescient warning, “The age-old struggle between socialism and capitalism is back with a vengeance ... coronavirus politics have taken root, possibly sowing the seeds for the biggest shift in our political system since the financial crisis.”

The only argument within the Tory government and the ruling class more generally is not if, but when a massive social, political and economic offensive must be mounted against the working class.

The op-ed columns of the *Telegraph* are filled with those who rail against every concession made to popular sentiment and concerns over COVID-19. For them, the only imperative is that workers are driven back to work as soon as possible so that the process of profit accumulation can be restored, and their bank-balances preserved. For them the hero of the hour is none other than US President Donald Trump, who “tells it like it is.”

Philip Johnston writes a pathetically stylised “letter to my baby grandson,” asking “are we jeopardising your future?” The “threat” to this four-month-old child, we are informed, is that “Public policymakers embrace a pernicious doctrine called the precautionary principle. This holds that all risk must be removed from our lives by regulation and that failure to do so is just about the worst thing any government can do.”

“The answer? Donald Trump turned to his favoured means of

communication to tweet in bold capitals: ‘WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF’... What sensible government would think otherwise? Indeed, is this really the national emergency that Boris Johnson said warrants the authoritarian powers taken by the Government?”

Elsewhere, Sherelle Jacobs complains, “Boris Johnson was panicked into a catastrophic U-turn” when “abandoning” his “herd immunity” strategy. “Championed by [Johnson’s adviser] Dominic Cummings, the approach was creepy, clinical and completely correct. ... He should pay heed to Trump, who is raring to get America up and running by Easter lest the cure be worse than the disease.”

The voices of caution are presently dominant within the government due to the elite’s fear of the explosive consequences of such a frontal assault on the working class. But this is only playing for time. The forces of the state are being strengthened, the arguments assembled for insisting on a return to work—not on the previous basis but coupled with demands for wage cuts, job losses and speed ups, as well as slashing non-essential public spending to meet the challenges of the heightened “national emergency.”

What is required now is an independent strategy for the political mobilisation of workers and young people for genuine socialism. Not the appropriation of social wealth by the capitalist state to further enrich the corporate elite, but the seizure of state power by the working class to create a socialist system guaranteeing decent jobs, health care, education, housing and pensions for all.

This begins by opposing all calls for national unity and sacrifice. It means rejecting the claim that there is no money to safeguard workers’ health and their livelihoods and taking up the demand for the seizure of the wealth of the banks and major corporations—to provide the necessary social protections for the present crisis, to pour billions into the NHS and retool industry and construction to produce ventilators and hospitals, not tanks, fighter-jets, warships and luxury flats.



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