

Boris Johnson's praise for the National Health Service: Hypocrisy without limit

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14 April 2020

Leaving hospital after seven days, three spent in intensive care, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson thanked his doctors and nurses and other National Health Service (NHS) workers who saved him from coronavirus. Speaking from his country residence, Chequers, Johnson said that the NHS “has saved my life. No question.” Waxing lyrical, Johnson declared:

“We’re making progress in this national battle because the British public formed a human shield around this country’s greatest national asset, our National Health Service. We understood and we decided that if together we could keep our NHS safe, if we could stop our NHS from being overwhelmed, then we could not be beaten, and this country would rise together and overcome this challenge as we have overcome so many challenges in the past.”

Johnson put human faces to this collective effort by naming some of those involved, “in particular two nurses who stood by my bedside for 48 hours when things could have gone either way,” Jenny [McGee] from New Zealand and Luis [Pitarma] from Portugal.

“And the reason in the end my body did start to get enough oxygen was because for every second of the night they were watching, and they were thinking and they were caring and making the interventions I needed. So that is how I also know that across this country, 24 hours a day, for every second of every hour, there are hundreds of thousands of NHS staff who are acting with the same care and thought and precision as Jenny and Luis.”

Soaring oratory indeed—and rank hypocrisy. For over four decades, since the election of the Thatcher government in 1979, Johnson and his ilk have done nothing but attack the NHS and set out to destroy it. The NHS has suffered death by a thousand cuts alongside backdoor privatisation of its most profitable sectors by both Tory governments and the Labour government of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown—equally hostile to the notion of universal public health care, free at the point of use.

Over the last decade, the Tories ramped up the offensive against the NHS—including seizing billions of pounds from

its budget in “efficiency savings.” The result has been catastrophic during the coronavirus pandemic.

NHS staff saved Johnson’s life, but his government is responsible for the death of more than 40 NHS workers who caught the coronavirus while treating the untold thousands who ended up in hospital thanks to his government’s “herd immunity” strategy allowing the untrammelled spread of the virus for weeks.

Millions have been outraged at seeing frontline doctors and nurses working without even the most basic personal protective equipment (PPE). This week, we learned that Tory cuts to the NHS included a 40 percent reduction in the stockpile of PPE between 2013 and 2016.

In June 2017, the same Tory MPs now lauding the NHS, Johnson among them, voted down a meagre Labour Party amendment to the Queen’s speech to give them a pay rise above the 1 percent level at which it was frozen for the previous seven years.

Johnson’s singled out nurses from New Zealand and Portugal, and migrant workers make up a substantial section of the NHS workforce. But his saccharine platitudes cannot conceal the fact that had the COVID-19 pandemic not broken out, both these nurses may have soon been booted out of the UK by Priti Patel’s Home Office.

Earlier this month, the home secretary announced that doctors, nurses and paramedics with work visas due to expire before October 1 would have them “automatically extended for a year so they can focus on fighting coronavirus.” But this reprieve for 2,800 NHS staff was from Patel’s proposed new visa system, part of the Tories’ post-Brexit “points-based” immigration system.

The media want this record of governmental criminality to be swept away by a tidal wave of public sympathy for Johnson, who has now undergone a Damascene conversion to the merits of the NHS. This is such a desirable political prize because of the anger and bitterness of workers towards the government due to its refusal to implement essential measures to defend their health and welfare. Ruling circles calculate that Johnson has been handed a golden opportunity

to restore national unity by claiming that we are somehow “all in this together,” whether a prime minister or a nurse.

Robert Shrimsley writes in the *Financial Times*, “Critics will legitimately question [Johnson’s] stewardship of this crisis. The UK death toll may end up being the highest in Europe and there are issues around the availability of protective clothing for health workers. But his personal crisis has replenished his political capital. ... The emotional film released soon after he left hospital was superbly pitched. ... Now, with his heartfelt praise for the organisation which ‘saved my life,’ a Tory leader has made himself high priest of the institution, described as the UK’s national religion.”

Simon Kelner in the *Independent* claims that “no longer will it be conscionable for a Conservative government to present the NHS as a monolithic instrument of a bloated state, inefficient and overmanned. No longer will those on the right of politics be able to trot out the lazy trope that the only organisations which employ more people than the NHS are the Red Army of China and the Indian Railways.”

All of which is a toxic mixture of wishful thinking and mendacity. Memories are not so short, nor workers so forgiving. Even on Johnson’s own Twitter post of his speech, workers commented:

- “Remember when all the Tories cheered as they blocked a much overdue pay rise for nurses?”

- Citing some of Johnson’s past racist comments, another said, “The irony of being saved in part by non-white folk that looked like ‘Letter Boxes, and gave you ‘Watermelon Smiles’ huh. ...”

- A picture of Johnson’s Brexit campaign “battle bus” pledging to direct £350 million a week away from the European Union and into the NHS, is posted with the question, “Where’s the money?”

- One person writes of Johnson’s life being saved, “that’s nice because several NHS staff owe their deaths to Boris Johnson.”

- Another comments: “We are set to have the highest death rate in Europe. ... Doctors still begging for PPE. I hate you.”

Even as Johnson was preparing his platitudes, his ministers were making abundantly clear that NHS workers can expect only continued attacks and betrayals from the government.

On Friday, Conservative Health Secretary Matt Hancock

provoked an outpouring of public outrage when, during Friday’s Downing Street briefing, he complained that NHS workers were using too many pieces of PPE!

“We need everyone to treat PPE like the precious resource it is. ... Everyone should use the equipment they clinically need, in line with the guidelines: no more and no less.” Speaking to the BBC, Hancock repeated, “I don’t want to impugn blame on people who have used more PPE than the guidelines suggest, because I understand the difficulties. What I would say is it is very important to use the right PPE and not overuse it.”

Health workers responded furiously. Rachel Clarke, a palliative care doctor, tweeted, “I can tell you, Matt Hancock, no kit is more precious than a nurse, a carer, a doctor. Staff who only too willingly risk their lives for others—as you fail to protect us.”

On Sunday, Hancock added insult to injury, telling *Sky News* he was “not aware” of any link between shortages of PPE and the deaths of health workers.

On Saturday, Priti Patel was asked to apologise for the government’s failure and replied through gritted teeth, “I am sorry if people feel there have been failings.” A Twitter user commented, “In the last fortnight I have been scared and frightened over the lack of #PPE. But I was never angry. Today I am. ... She is not fit to govern.”

It will not be long before Johnson’s words of praise for the NHS will be nothing but a bitter memory, cited by angry doctors and nurses as the Tories resume their efforts to destroy it. Those now being hailed in the media as “our brave heroes” will be told: Expect more cuts, more pain so that we can collectively pay for the £350 billion plus just handed out to the banks and corporations in the necessary spirit of “national unity” and “shared sacrifice.”

And it will not be long before workers will be forced to give their answer to Johnson et al. by waging the necessary political struggle to bring down the Tories and fight for a workers’ government and socialism.



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