

England's Euro 2020: “National unity” in furtherance of “herd immunity”

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The UK government's organisation of the postponed 2020 European Football Championship has produced scenes of politically orchestrated insanity.

Amid a huge surge of the pandemic threatening thousands more mostly working-class lives, the population is being encouraged to crowd together in large numbers and sign up to a fairy-tale of “national unity”.

Widespread passion for the game, an appreciation for a national team shorn of its usual egos and including admired public figures like Marcus Rashford and, above all, the emotional tensions built up during the pandemic have combined to give England's success a larger-than-life character. 20.9 million people tuned in to watch the quarter-final match against Ukraine (26.1 million including online streams), 81.8 percent of the possible audience. 27.6 million people watched the semi-final match against Denmark on ITV, making it the largest ever peak football audience for a single channel.

But neither politics nor the pandemic are suspended by fond hopes and good will. Following a well-worn playbook, the Euros are being used as a vehicle for anti-scientific propaganda and nationalist mythmaking.

In addition to the millions watching at home, 66,000 people were packed into Wembley Stadium in London. But this was only the most visible of countless other gatherings in pubs, city centres and family homes throughout the country. Looking at photo features in one newspaper after another is to see what a massive super-spreader event looks like.

Even this will be dwarfed by Sunday's final against Italy, also being held at Wembley. Broadcasters are predicting it could exceed the record 32.3 million people who watched the 1966 World Cup final—the last occasion that England reached a major soccer final. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has not ruled out opening Wembley to its full 90,000-person capacity. A government advisor told the *i* newspaper, “There's a growing feeling that this

could be a moment we cannot let pass.”

These activities are accelerating the already rapid spread of COVID-19. Imperial College London's React study reported on Thursday that between the periods May 20-June 7 and June 24-July 5, the number of new infections quadrupled. Cases are now doubling every six days and are, for the first time, significantly (30 percent) more prominent among men.

Head of the study Professor Stephen Reilly explained, “Because of the timing, it could be that watching football is resulting in men having more social activity than normal. If I had to speculate about the impact of the Euros I would first think about the increased probability that people are mixing inside more.”

According to the Imperial study, if infections continue to multiply at this speed, the country will breach 100,000 cases a day even before the last public restrictions are ended on July 19.

Using the infection rates after the June 18 England-Scotland match as a guide, leading modeller Professor Karl Friston estimates that some 70,000 people will have contracted COVID-19 as a result of events surrounding the semi-final. He predicts they will go on to infect another nearly 500,000 people within a month. The effect of the final will be larger.

The whole political establishment is encouraging this behaviour. Johnson has extended pub opening times on Sunday and told businesses to consider being flexible to cater for staff absences and lateness on Monday, especially grotesque given the government's refusal to protect workers from COVID-19. Labour Party Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has created a prize draw for tickets to the final for people who have received their first, insufficient, vaccine or even just booked an appointment to receive it.

The media is revelling in the carnival atmosphere, with warnings from scientists reported as if coming from

another planet if at all. On June 29, the *Guardian*'s James Greig wrote in praise of "moments of collective joy", "Yes, we must mourn our losses, but we must also party in the streets." In the closing minutes of the England-Denmark game, ITV commentator Sam Matterface told tens of millions of viewers, "I tell you what if this comes off, you can do what you want tonight, you've had a terrible 16 months... You deserve this, England deserves this."

No one should believe that it is a love for football driving the enthusiasm in political circles. There is a lot of money at stake. Besides the tens of millions that will be spent in pubs in just a few hours on Sunday, there is a hope that "Winning the final, along with lots of other things, like reopening, the easing of restrictions, could help unlock many billions of pounds worth of additional spending," says Simon French, chief economist at Panmure Gordon, speaking to the BBC.

Fundamentally, the Euros are the high point of the propaganda campaign to insist that the pandemic crisis is over and that any public health restrictions harmful to big business can be scrapped.

Large gatherings have been encouraged by the relentless insistence, across the political spectrum, that the real threat of COVID-19 has passed, and are meant to serve as further proof of the population successfully "learning to live with the virus".

They are a cynical attempt to push a programme of herd immunity and weaken broader scientific consciousness and social responsibility. It should be noted that vaccination uptake has almost halved in England over the past fortnight, with public health officials blaming the "return to normality" narrative.

The political scaffolding for this homicidal agenda, which has so far cost 150,000 lives and brought the conflict between the working class and the government and corporations to an extraordinary degree of tension, is the myth of a national unity in which all social conflicts and ills are supposedly dissolved. England's exploits on the football pitch are held up as the promise of a potentially united nation, which can jointly overcome all challenges.

This has led to the usual noxious jingoism, with England fans told not to invoke the Second World War by singing "Ten German bombers" and censured for booing the Danish national anthem and for one imbecile shining a laser pointer in the eyes of Danish goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel during an England penalty. The *Daily Mail* trumpeted "Danes gelded" after the country's defeat.

However, the dominant theme this tournament, led by the "left", has been of a supposedly "progressive patriotism", a "patriotism that is generous and enhances national cohesion", writes *New Statesman* editor Jason Cowley. The England team has been touted as a model of national pride combined with modern values and a "social conscience", an alternative to the Johnson government's tub-thumping jingoism and racism. Figures around Labour have urged the party to seize this opportunity to tell "Labour's story on patriotism and national identity", in the words of *LabourList* writer Jake Richards.

There is an air of the absurd to these efforts. The England football team has "achieved the formidable feat of uniting a fractured, polarised nation", claims Martin Fletcher in the *New Statesman*, producing a tournament in which "England itself seemed transported" by a squad of players who have "pointed the way, on and off the field, to a better England", according to the *Guardian*'s David Conn.

England's amiable and popular manager Gareth Southgate has been elevated to the status of a political idol, upon whose shoulders the fate of English society rests, and whose "Letter to England" written at the start of the tournament is a masterpiece of world literature. Johnson and Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer have been called on by columnists, pollsters and each other to "emulate", "study" and generally "be more like" Southgate.

Behind the breathless rhetoric is a clear and reactionary political agenda. These commentators are attempting to engineer a major shift to the right in British politics, summed up by the demand from John Denham, the former Labour MP and now director of the Centre for English Identity and Politics, to go beyond what he derisively calls "a 90-minute nation".

No matter how palatably presented, the function of this rebranded nationalism is the same as it always has been. Just as much as Johnson, the "progressive patriots" hope to use the Euros to promote the dangerous political lie that "we are all in this together", a filthy whitewash of the policy of mass infection and death, wage cuts and job losses pursued by Labour and the Tories for more than a year and continued to this day.



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