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NHS Workers and the UK media in the time of Covid-19

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Since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis in the UK, there has been more commentary and debate about NHS workers flying around the online media-scape than it has been possible to keep up with. However, some issues have risen to particular prominence over the weeks since the crisis intensified, some of the most noteworthy of which include the Tory hypocrisy of #ClapForNHS, the entrenched devaluation of nurses¹ that this crisis has shone a new light on (and hopefully intervened in), and the NHS workforce's dependence on BAME people – who live and work under a government whose party is openly hostile to us.²

News media footage of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak standing either side of the door at 10 Downing Street clapping for NHS workers on 26 March has quickly become an iconic image of Britain in the time of Covid-19. But for those who support the existence, principles and mission of the NHS, the sound of their clapping rings hollow. The Tories have been attacking and eroding the NHS with damaging policy reform and legislation for decades. From the Thatcher government's introduction of competitive tendering, outsourcing and the marketisation of internal services, through the introduction of 'Private Finance Initiatives' under Major, the implementation of the Health and Social Care Act of 2012 under Cameron,

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jan/29/nurses-invisible-devalued-women-inequality-change>

² <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/boris-johnson-telegraph-column-muslim-women-letterboxes-bank-robbers-spike-islamophobic-incidents/>

and his ill-judged EU referendum – the outcome of which has produced a crisis in the NHS workforce like no other – the Tories have enacted change after damaging change to the detriment of the ability of beleaguered frontline workers to do their jobs as effectively and safely as they should.³

The incongruous reliance by the PM and his spokespeople on the anachronistic and sub-Churchillian rhetoric of wartime when talking about the crisis, the NHS and its workers only emphasises a point that was made earlier this year on the BBC's *Call the Midwife*. This is that the role played by Winston Churchill in the formation of a comprehensive NHS, free at the point of use, has long been exaggerated, albeit this continues to be disputed by historians.⁴ In the opening episode of the always socially critical, often radical, flagship Sunday night drama series that aired at the beginning of the year – as the crisis was unfolding – one character tore into the Conservatives. A clear line under the litany of hypocrisies they have uttered and enacted in the name of the NHS through the decades was drawn when the show's resident physician Dr Patrick Turner (Stephen McGann) lambasted remarks made about the health service in the depicted aftermath of the death of the former PM: 'The NHS had nothing to do with Churchill, or his party'. This too may be an exaggeration, but that Churchill's Tories voted against it 21 times is not.⁵

³ For a detailed analysis of Tory attacks on the NHS, including the 2012 Health and Social Care Act, see Colin Leys, **'The English NHS: from market failure to trust, professionalism and democracy'**, *Soundings* 64: <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/64/the-english-nhs>.

⁴ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/why-should-the-people-wait-any-longer-how-labour-built-the-nhs/>

⁵ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/why-should-the-people-wait-any-longer-how-labour-built-the-nhs/>

Today's NHS certainly has nothing to do with Churchill, and no amount of pseudo-wartime posturing and hypocritical hand-clapping by Boris Johnson or his cabinet will change this.

Lest we forget, it was just a few weeks ago, as the Covid-19 crisis was really taking hold in the UK, that the mainstream media was reporting on the staffing crisis in the NHS,⁶ which has been exacerbated by the exodus from the service of EU-citizen NHS workers who have left this country in their thousands in the years since the referendum. This produced a crisis in the workforce that left the UK in the position of having 43,000 vacant nursing posts at the outset of a global pandemic that has placed truly unprecedented levels of pressure on the service and its workers.⁷ And long before the Covid-19 crisis had even emerged, the NHS was already under more pressure than it had ever been, not just because of the recent departure from the service of these EU workers, but thanks to a decade of austerity cuts, and the negative impact of the implementation of the 2012 Health and Social Care Act, which fundamentally changed the nature of the service as we had previously known it..

On 2 April 2020, Louise Condon, Professor of Nursing at Swansea University, wrote an impassioned letter to *The Guardian* about the way in which the nation's nurses were being spoken about and depicted in the media: as she argued, in news reportage about frontline NHS workers treating and caring for the infected, the work of nurses was frequently being devalued, disrespected

⁶ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-8075253/NHS-needs-43-000-nurses-one-eight-job-posts-empty.html>

⁷ <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-NHS-nursing-workforce.pdf>

and de-professionalised.⁸ This phenomenon, although it is far from new, seems all the more egregious at the present time, when nurses and fellow healthcare professionals and NHS colleagues are risking (and in some cases losing) their lives. Many will by now have seen footage of flummoxed Health Secretary Matt Hancock on BBC *Question Time* on 2 April admitting to Dame Donna Kinnair of the Royal College of Nursing that he didn't know that nurses dying of Covid-19 were at that time not even being counted: 'four doctors have died so far ... and some nurses'.⁹

In Condon's view, representation and perception are an integral part of the undervaluing of nurses. In posing the question 'When will the media wake up to the fact that nurses are not angels but highly competent clinicians?' she gets right to the heart of the issue – the media and popular cultural representation of nurses that has plagued public understanding of their professional status and clinical skills for decades. Thirty-five years earlier, nurse and writer Jane Salvage was already highlighting that in viewing the nurse as 'a selfless ministering angel' it was easy to lose sight of them as 'a skilled worker' doing 'a difficult and complex job'.¹⁰ In the same article Salvage also drew attention to the extent to which the NHS has been dependent on the labour of nurses of colour throughout its history. This remains the case today.

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/02/its-time-nurses-got-the-recognition-they-deserve>

⁹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-matt-hancock-question-time-bbc-video-nurses-deaths-a9446076.html>

¹⁰ Jane Salvage, 'Nurses – Behind the Painted Smile.' *Spare Rib* no. 153 (April 1985), pp. 6-8. See also her book *The Politics of Nursing*, Heinemann, 1985.

In 2016 the BBC documentary *Black Nurses: The Women Who Saved the NHS*¹¹ shone an important light not only on the crucial contributions made by BAME workers to the viability of the NHS as an institution right from its inception, but also on the racist abuses these nurses have suffered from patients and colleagues, and continue to suffer today.¹² This is something that Sonia Sodha makes painfully clear in a recent *Guardian* article in which she holds the government to account for the racist policies of its party.¹³ One of the most vicious of these has been its treatment of Windrush migrants, including 85-year-old former NHS nurse Icilda Williams, who, after thirty years' service nursing this nation, was repeatedly refused entry to the country after she retired.¹⁴

It is not long since the Prime Minister left the intensive care unit and ward at St Thomas's Hospital in London, where he was treated for his Covid-19 infection by, among other NHS workers, lung specialist Dr Luigi Camporata, an EU national from Italy;¹⁵ nurse Luis Pitarma, an EU national from Portugal;

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b083dgtb>

¹² <https://www.itv.com/news/2019-10-31/can-i-have-a-white-doctor-for-the-operation-racist-abuse-against-nhs-staff-almost-triples-itv-news-finds/>

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/nhs-heroes-and-targets-of-racists>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jan/10/nhs-nurse-denied-visa-entry-uk>

¹⁵ https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_aprile_07/coronavirus-johnson-ospedale-c-anche-italiano-medici-che-assistono-premier-a53a7e4e-78c6-11ea-ab65-4f14b5300fbb.shtml?fbclid=IwAR3Sfj2KeSc8wDu_oktpAqePMtovcQnzG18opseAOEmlxRsz91u_rWDrKj4

and nurse Jenny McGee, an immigrant from New Zealand. He has been outspoken in thanking these nurses in particular for saving his life.¹⁶

Time will tell if Mr Johnson's stance on the value of these NHS workers will extend beyond this individual expression of gratitude to reach his politics: whether, for example, when the worst of this crisis is over, he will re-evaluate reported Tory intentions to include the NHS in a trade deal with Donald Trump.¹⁷ Will his party, which cheered in the House of Commons in 2017, after they had voted down a bill to increase the pay of NHS staff¹⁸, in time to come reconsider their literal devaluation of these workers? Early signs suggest not. On 24 June 2020, a Parliamentary vote was taken on an opposition motion to introduce weekly Covid-19 testing for NHS and social care workers.¹⁹ Johnson's Tories comprehensively voted it down. The clapping has stopped.

¹⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/boris-johnson-nurses-nhs/2020/04/13/51498d34-7bfa-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html

¹⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-nhs-trade-deal-trump-corbyn-brexit-general-election-manifesto-a9219566.html>

¹⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6_MfQ9FloE. This has become more famous since the Covid-19 crisis, thanks to its widespread recirculation in recent weeks.

¹⁹ <https://votes.parliament.uk/Votes/Commons/Division/802#noes>.