

It's Our NHS

Report on the 4 March NHS rally

By Alan Taman

The day was a sea of colour, clamour and song. People from all over the country, of all ages, from all backgrounds, chanting, shouting, walking and singing with but one purpose: to tell everyone that the NHS belonged to all of us and was being pulled apart by a government that placed ideology above all else.

John Lister's opening speech at Tavistock Square made the point that the march was a declaration from all over the UK. 'This march alone won't get us where we need to be', he said, 'It's a beginning. Don't go home and do nothing, go home and organise. We can beat these people.'

John was followed by 14 other speakers, all of them rallying the crowd. These included Dr Gurj Sandhu, Emergency Consultant, who said:

"In a world full of fake news and alternative facts, let me give you some truths from the front line about the NHS. Emergency Departments are at crisis point. There is no horizontal space left for doctors to examine patients.

"In this wonderful capital city of ours, we have run out of beds to look after our sickest children. Yet junior doctors and nurses every day perform miracles to keep people safe. Social care is at crisis point. The system is saturated to the point where we cannot get people out into the community.

"Despite these miracles people are dying. It is a well-established fact that austerity kills. In 2018-19 in real terms, NHS funding is going down."

The most entertaining 'act' of the morning was probably Dr Phil Hammond, who got the crowd chanting several memorable phrases, such as "The NHS isn't over-spent, it's under-funded by 20 per cent!". No one should doubt the power of that; advertisers have been tapping it for decades. Every little helps...

Lesley Page, from the Royal College of Midwives, said that "midwives are there for the birth of our babies. They are the enablers of the birth of our future. As we march today, let's stay united and let us re-double our efforts to fight, fight and fight again the NHS that we all love."

Lesley was followed by Larry Sanders, brother of US Democrat socialist Bernie and spokesman for the Green Party for health, who put it simply:

"Last week there were dozens of meetings like this in America because the despicable Trump is trying to throw 20 million Americans out of health care. If we don't fight to save the NHS, the whole left wing in this country is finished.

"For 50 years the average age of death has gone up. What happened last year after 6 years of cuts in health care and social care? It turned. For the first time, the average age is lower. That is a sign. That is what we are up against."

Gill George, from Shropshire Defend Our NHS, brought waves of laughter when she read out choice phrases from her own area's STP, which included "We are going to have the healthiest population on the planet in Shropshire. I know that because I've been reading our STP! We are going to 'embrace

the specific paradigm of wellness'. We are going to develop 'a single shared view of the place-based needs of the population using advanced business intelligence capabilities'. Well what nonsense.

"Our position in Shropshire is that we fought back. We stopped savage cuts to services.... Fighting back does not guarantee victory but it's much better than sitting back and waiting to see what happens."

To say the march to Parliament Square was successful would be to understate its sheer size. Many could not even get into the Square, and were still marching when the speeches began.

The rally at Parliament Square, where DFNHS and Save Lewisham Campaign member Dr Louise Irvine was the compere, had an equally impressive range of speakers, and almost certainly a much bigger crowd.

Dr Aislinn Macklin Doherty, from the Junior Doctors Alliance, appeared in front of the crowd in her white coat and said: "I am used to treating people based on what they need and not what an insurance company thinks they are worth. There are not many doctors in the world who are lucky enough to say that. And I'm worried that I won't be able to say that much longer.

"There have been a tidal wave of private companies taking over your NHS from the inside, misrepresented and spun as a good thing when this leads to higher costs and poorer quality care and must be resisted. If we all act together we can change things and reinstate the NHS back to its original principles."

DFNHS member and Keep Our NHS Public Co-Chair Dr Tony O'Sullivan:

"We in the NHS achieved real integrated care with other agencies. Our skill and commitment in the staff working together with patients. We don't need Simon Stevens or STPs to tell us what reconfiguration means. Now in Keep Our NHS Public the fight is on to save the very services those families I've worked with for 25 years rely on. This government is ideologically opposed to funding public services. It is disintegrating the NHS and social care. Where private companies may profit from our suffering.

"Our principle is that we must unite on what we agree on. The only value of coming here today is if we go away determined to join in the battle to save our NHS and social care."

The "headline act" was undoubtedly Jeremy Corbyn, who said:

"Without the NHS being properly funded we would not be a civilised country. Anyone who dilutes it has literally no morality.

"The Tories cut taxes on big business. Don't let them tell you there is no money for the NHS. The money is there.

"Think for a moment for every student nurse forced to go to a food bank as they care for people. One of those things that has come about from a political choice made by a government that underfunds the NHS and social care when they know full well the resources are there to do it.

"They say tax cuts are more important than dignity. I say let's support and value our NHS staff.

“The NHS was created by people with vision. The idea that healthcare should be free at the point of use and a human right. Our NHS is not for sale. It’s ours, for everybody in this country to keep.

“You know how strong our endeavour, our determination, our principles are. Defend the NHS with all your might.”

Keith Venables, Acting Chair of Health Campaigns Together and Co-chair of KONP, wound up the speeches at the end of what was a momentous day for anyone who was there.

Was it effective? I can tell you we made a difference. The sense of solidarity and affirmation of anyone who was there are all the stronger for it. We don’t yet know if we are winning but we are uniting. And if this government will not listen, we will not be stilled. It is our NHS.

Give it back.

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