

A future for the NHS



By David Fellows

I have no medical training or hospital management experience. I have from time to time had fleeting involvement in health development issues and I have been a hospital patient but I make no claims in writing this except that I am a general client of the NHS. Like millions of others I am simply concerned with the state of play: the lack of GP availability, the quality of some diagnostic services, the management of outpatient services and the speed of hospital referrals.

In exasperation the not-so-wealthy are paying privately for GP services, specialist consultations and surgery. The problem predates COVID. Heavy demands are placed on all health care systems by increasingly sophisticated diagnostics, medical procedures, patients care and medication. Add to this an increasingly elderly population and the country faces the prospect of a colossal financial burden for a less than satisfactory service.

The once acceptable approach of throwing money at the NHS is very obviously not working. Whatever sum is requested and

provided is almost immediately decried as insufficient.

The motivation behind the current nurses pay dispute raises a further issue. The demands made are potentially destructive of the NHS, public services in general and the economy. This raises the question as to whether nurses leaders are actually voicing a profound dissatisfaction with the NHS. Has its vastness and complexity come to alienate the very people on whose dedication it depends?

Hitherto the international direction of travel has been towards comprehensive national health services but none has gone so far with integration as the UK. Of course the NHS is not the sole UK provider. Private medicine is available in all fields. The scale of core state provision is around 70% of total medical service expenditure in the UK, similar to core provision in many other developed countries.

But elsewhere the core is often extensively disaggregated. For instance, multiple providers for commissioning (eg not for profit insurance schemes for core provision), hospitals and primary care. Levels of integration may be available. Core services may receive public and private financial contributions and provision may be made for equalising insurance costs of those with poor health. Services for children, unemployed and elderly may be financed by the state. There are many variants including discretionary aspects.

The weakness of the UK system is that the core is massively integrated and almost entirely state driven. The UK has broad geographic and localised divisions of the service but this does not overcome the fact that the centre has overarching responsibility and control. Government is commonly accepted as

responsible in all respects. Complaints ultimately rest with Government, shortcomings usually blamed by officials and the media on lack of funds.

With respect to core provision the state is singly charged with operational responsibility for contributing vision, strategy, management, procurement, facilities, personnel, training , medical record development and patient communication. Personal dedication and compassion are valued but the organisational architecture is deficient in drivers for efficiency, innovation and flexibility of reward.

A state with more limited responsibility for delivery obtains a better vantage point from which services can be judged and structural refinements made. Where ultimate operational responsibility is distributed there are more active voices to explain the difficult issues that beset service delivery, more partnering choice for providers and more provider choice for patients.

The bait noire in this alternative universe is the US health system. It is becoming more comprehensive but remains unsatisfactory by the standards of many developed countries and is far too expensive. It is not the starting point for any new health provision model. Other developed countries offer more varied systems as Federico's review of OECD countries [\[1\]](#) demonstrates.

Frederico is an advocate of progress by marginal refinement for health service development. I suggest this precept that should be readily embraced. The NHS is too exposed to cope with promises of major reform.

My proposal, therefore, is for the Government to affirm the benefits of a more diversely operated health service having both public and private sector counterparts with common regulatory and performance oversight. Where appropriate, public and private sector providers could share facilities perhaps with initial cost borne by the private counterpart and medical expertise could be shared too. Collaboration could also be relevant in the development of management and medical information systems. Private hospitals could qualify as teaching hospitals. It would be a gradual evolution.

The initiative could commence with a call for proposals covering all aspects of potential development within the themes of evolutionary change, service improvement, learning from diversity and providing the prospect of an affordable outcome to exchequer and citizens. These would become the criteria for success on which progress would depend. This is more specific and extensive than the reference to public service reform and the Integrated Care Board review contained in the Chancellor's Budget Statement.

The outcome could embrace a variety of organisational arrangements. Taxation aspects may require phasing in to avoid any initial net cost to the exchequer. Ultimately there would be a reduction of cost and demand on public provision.

The development process could add significantly to the UK's innovatory record in the fields of medical service delivery, information and medical technology. Opponents would charge the Government with developing a two tier health service but this would be difficult to sustain given the proposed criteria for pursuing the development.

The public can see the cracks widening and know that the solution is not just more state funding. Any Government that had the courage to tackle the problem honestly and openly could be met with sighs of relief, particularly if the approach was subtle, gradual and sensitive to the dedication of NHS personnel. There are always reasons to postpone a difficult journey but surely the time has arrived.

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[\[1\]](#) Comparative Health Systems – A new Framework by Federico Toth, Cambridge University Press

The new PM's ten conundrums



By David Fellows

The successful PM candidate will face a series of conundrums as he/she ascends to the highest political office in the UK. It will be a daunting task and the contest has provided opponents with so much ammunition.

Ten key issues

The battle for leadership could have been more useful if it had addressed models of government or economics or service delivery or even styles of leadership but it was rarely about

any of these. So let us examine ten of the key issues the new PM will face, some already in play and some that remain largely unspoken.

PM & Cabinet

We've got a collegiate cabinet system with cross-government working facilitated by cabinet colleagues and overseen by a PM who clarifies direction, adds impetus, refreshes the machine and does the communication thing.

So ideally the new PM brings in people who are good at learning, have interesting ideas, knowledge, drive, practical insight and of course a collegiate mindset and a willingness to help others integrate and develop. How to create the right team?

Strategy & Delivery

The contestants will no doubt be discussing with potential ministerial candidates their vision with reference to a selection of portfolios. What about new or refined models of cabinet government, the civil service or the health service. The latter two are clearly in deep organisational and professional trouble of all kinds. Some bold and honest thinking is required (see later for health). What about radical views on deregulation, service efficiencies and service reductions.

Sometimes the strategy is right and delivery needs sharpening. Delivery is a perpetual problem. The idea that outsourcing or

agency status eliminates Government responsibility is nonsense, even managerial responsibility rests with government if things start to go seriously wrong. If we embrace this how could it change things?

Growth & Innovation

Growth-directed investment incentives are mentioned from time to time including infrastructure projects that could be part of the solution. Of course the Government are already buying innovation in many fields: health, defense, power generation, electronics. We in the UK are not necessarily benefiting from the growth potential of this spending because we often buy from specialist companies in other countries. We tend to believe in going to the market but not market shaping. So we reduce taxes or invest in public services and expect spending to take place here when it actually it ends up taking place somewhere else, not always but perhaps too often. But who is keeping the score and thinking through the results?

Resilience & Trade

We do trade deals to broaden our markets to generate business for the UK and provide a diversity of suppliers for imports offering price competition and resilience. To an extent it offsets the hostility of EU countries to our departure from the EU but its purpose is much broader than that.

We also talk about internal resilience but resilience in what? The security services think we have Huawei sorted and can buy non-critical products. Of course if you don't make PPE then in a pandemic, PPE becomes a critical product. In fact anything

you don't make to some extent is a vulnerability because, as we begin to see, almost anything that comes from outside our borders can be denied us through deliberate or chance logistical problems, skill shortages or scarcity of commodities that we left others to grow or source. So we become entirely self-sufficient? No, but we must energetically encourage diversity in UK business activity giving us a greater readiness to understand and respond to opportunities and threats.

We pride ourselves on our innovation but entrepreneurship is the key to development and it is development that gets the wheels spinning and produces a virtuous cycle with iterations of product innovation leading at some point to a commercial breakthrough. It is entrepreneurship that keeps the cycle going and nurtures the vision of generating a major business. We probably don't appreciate and encourage entrepreneurship enough.

I haven't mentioned agriculture, do we really want it? The lack of interest in the development of this sector is astonishing, a point Jeremy Clarkson makes only half in jest.

This whole field needs clarity about how we see growth being created and how the state may help or hinder a successful outcome. Are we prepared to engage in such thinking or are we frightened to be charged of attempting to create a command economy?

Tax Cuts & Modelling

The cost of petrol is astronomic and is hitting some people

and businesses more than others in a haphazard manner. Without time to adjust this can be catastrophic (we are a highly mobile society). Is it not sensible to take some of the tax off petrol given that the soaring price draws in more revenue than could have been expected even six months ago (there may be some progress on this as I write but what is the economic plan behind it?).

If we are to achieve economic growth about which we are all so keen, why deter the relocation of businesses into the UK and the retention of businesses here by increasing the current rate of corporation tax (lowering it would be preferable but let's not get carried away). Instead we seem to be set on raising it with the intention of reducing it almost at once (unless I misunderstand the intention).

Borrowing is an alternative to taxing but we already have huge debts, inflation is causing havoc, more borrowing means even higher interest rates and a mounting debt pile. Supply chains are still stretched and could get tighter, we are financing an indefinite war, a recession looms in the EU, trade hostility is brewing with the EU and even the US (Federal rather than individual states), spending pressures abound, so what scale of economic stress, deficit and debt burden we are walking towards? What are the tolerances envisaged in the various iterations of the BoE and Minford economic models, are they all reassuring in their results?

Health & Defense

This is the coming issue and the secret is...we have enough money for neither.

Health is literally infinitely expensive and everyone involved needs someone to blame and that is always going to be the Government unless the system can embrace other sources of authority and cash to share the pressure. Most alternative systems involve insurance schemes and privately run hospitals. There are some very good systems no more expensive than our own, some less expensive. Ours is not amongst the best by any means and is on the verge of breaking the state politically and financially.

The problems include explaining the situation rationally and calmly, choosing the right model, managing the transition and defining the state's role and residual financial responsibilities. The Opposition, supported by the BBC, will go to war over this which is why the PM must prove to be a hugely effective communicator. The Opposition will secretly hope that the Government (I am assuming the current Government stays in power long enough to do this of course) succeeds in making an effective and radical change but is mortally wounded in the process. This is the challenge!

Assuming we capitalise on the new arrangements to renew UK medical practice, and goodness knows it needs it, we could generate a boom in UK-based medical innovation. Good for health, good for business, good for UK-based international trade if done well.

Similarly we do not have much extra money right now for defense. But could we do more to grow our advanced engineering, telecommunications, artificial intelligence, UAVs, technical skills and products out of the defense budget with the resulting economic growth supporting our defense aspirations? It is not a total solution but perhaps it needs to be more of the way forward.

Housing Targets & Birthrate

Well the plan seems to be to abandon targets. Housing will just appear where it is needed. Basically Opposition seats. No effective policy, rapidly declining birth rate/tax payers.

Regions v Greater South East

Is the next government going to tackle regional economic growth in a concerted manner or just call everything in the regions levelling up and allow the golden triangle to roar away into the sunset as the appendix to the [Levelling Up White Paper](#) suggests (see previous note [\[1\]](#)). Levelling up opportunity for future generations (see previous note [\[2\]](#)) through economic growth is the only game for the regions. Will Government ever be prepared to accept such an anti-establishment path? Probably not.

Boris the Good v Boris the Bad

Brilliant communicator, great hair, short on hard truths, short on strategy, short on focus, difficult to control, easily led astray – but with the right support he was probably unbeatable. Yes it was a big ask. It's virtually calling for grown-ups to exist in politics and the civil service at the same time and in the same place ... hence we are where we are. With all this in mind and reflecting on the earlier issues, the PM really does need to think practically not just politically about his/her appointments from the perspective of creating a functioning government that compensates for their own shortcomings. Sage and impartial advice required.

So

The world is not in a good place. Apart from a multitude of global issues to address we need a government that has the courage to tell the country that it can never make all the right decisions for everyone all the time, or indeed at any time. At best it can tackle a limited number of things reasonably well and only then in the event that it makes the best possible choices. Otherwise overload is always ready to destroy leadership and nothing will be done well. Our personal choices define us yet state dependency is a constant prospect. Is modern politics capable of drawing a line under its competency?

PMs expect to be shot at by all and sundry and are never disappointed. Their ambition is soon reduced to survival. It is tempting to assume that neglecting hard problems and hard truths is inevitable and this results in false promises. Is this really the only way forward? Can our next PM plot a different course?

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[1]

See:

<http://blog-pfmconnect.com/levelling-up-white-paper-commentary-time-to-deliver/>

[2]

See:

<https://blog-pfmconnect.com/levelling-up-opportunity-for-future-generations>