

Nationalist Health Service

Why does the Government say 'your NHS' rather than 'your country'?

by Theodore Dalrymple



It is time, surely, to change the name of our country from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Kingdom of the National Health Service. When the Chief Medical Officer asked 65,000 retired doctors and nurses to return to work, it was because 'Your NHS needs you,' not because 'Your country needs you,' or even because 'Your patients need you.' No, your NHS needs you.

I pass over in silence whether this is the best moment to recall to the colours many people of an age most susceptible to the worst effects of an epidemic illness. Nor do I reflect upon the conditions of work that have made so many staff wish to retire from it as soon as possible. This is no time for carping criticism.

But surely the appeal to the NHS's need rather than the

country's is highly significant. A 70 year-long campaign of propaganda has successfully insinuated into many minds – perhaps into most minds – that an appeal to the country's interests would be tantamount to appealing to nationalism of the worst kind (xenophobia, imperialism, injustice, etc.), whereas an appeal to the NHS would be, and is, an appeal to benevolence, equality, decency, altruism, compassion, social justice, and so forth. This is despite the fact that health inequality has actually increased under the NHS and its results by comparison with other comparable healthcare systems are mediocre at best, and often among the worst of their class. Never mind: it was born with Original Virtue, and it is the intentions that count in the public mind (as some moral philosophers would not doubt agree that it should), not the performance.

The strange thing is that, if I had not been trapped in France when the appeal came, and they felt obliged by the crisis to accept over 70s, I would have answered it, though I would have done no good and might have lost my life into the bargain. But it would be for the country and the patients, above all for the patients and not for the NHS, that I would have died.

First published in