

Twitter Thread by Rob Ford



Rob Ford

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So, one more set of thoughts on Labour and patriotism. Last one for now, I promise. I think there are some interesting underlying similarities between Labour's patriotism headache and the Conservatives' traditional NHS headache

If Labour focuses on flag and patriotism then I can see your point. But it seems to me that what Starmer's doing is neutralising it as a negative. Which is simply sensible.

— David Aaronovitch (@DAaronovitch) [February 7, 2021](#)

In both cases you have an issue where (1) A consensus "this is a good thing" view is held by lopsided majority of the country (2) A substantial & vocal group of activists within the party dissents from this view (3) (partly because of this) the party is less trusted on the issue

For example, with the Tories on the NHS. Since the foundation of the NHS, voters have suspected that the Tories cannot "be trusted" with it. That they secretly dislike it. That, given the chance, they would privatise it. Etc, etc. Lab campaigns always play on this.

That suspicion exists, in part, because there *is* a significant and vocal minority of Con activists who *do* talk loudly, and frequently, about how the NHS doesn't actually perform that well, is inefficient, that British voters' attachment to it is irrational, etc.

The existence of this vocal minority is not an accident. It is of a piece with other Con ideological beliefs - preference for the free market, belief heavily unionised public sector institutions are inefficient, dislike of planning etc

The result is that in all the polling there has ever been the Tories are at a disadvantage on the NHS. Neutralising that disadvantage somehow is a perennial issue for them. And loud, NHS sceptic activists, think tanks etc are a perennial problem in achieving that goal

The structure of Labour's "flags problem" is similar. A massive majority of the public thinks of itself as patriotic. And, for as long as we have had polling, Labour has tended to lag the Conservatives in perceptions of patriotism

And, again, one big reason for this is because there is, and has been for a long time, a vocal section of the left activist base which is loudly suspicious of patriotism in general, and patriotism in politics in particular

And again there are good ideological reasons for this. Suspicion of patriotism fits easily with other left ideological beliefs - socialism, internationalism, cosmopolitanism, anti-racism. And again, Con campaigns have looked to play on this relative weakness since forever.

All the polling there has ever been tends therefore to show Labour at a disadvantage on this issue. Neutralising this disadvantage somehow is a perennial issue for the party. And loud, patriotism sceptic activists, thinkers etc are a perennial problem in achieving that goal.

So those are the similarities. Here's where I see the big difference: it is a lot *easier* to make a concrete, credible and easy to understand "big offer" on the NHS than it is on patriotism. And in opposition you need a big, concrete, credible offer to cut through.

The easiest Con solution to the NHS problem is the one we saw Boris Johnson wheel out in 2019 - lots of big numbers. "We will spend xx Billion pounds. We will build dozens of hospitals. We will hire thousands of doctors and nurses."

This never *eliminates* the public's suspicion. They tend to still think the Cons will stop spending extra, or start spending it in the wrong ways (cronies, private sector) at the first opportunity. But it does *neutralise* the issue. Big numbers are an easy to grasp heuristic.

It also provides an easy way to drown out the internal naysayers. When a free market think tank criticises NHS performance, or recommends more private health care, the Cons can simply go "we reject that analysis. We believe in the NHS. That's why we are spending record £££ on it"

What is the "patriotism" equivalent to "we will build 100 hospitals, and hire 10,000 nurses"? I have no idea. I'm not sure there is one. Which means there is no simple policy package that can be used to telegraph commitment and rebut internal sceptics.

Yet the credibility problem remains, and hence the temptation to do *something* to at least close the deficit is hard to resist. The risk is Lab falls into the trap of Sir Humphrey's "politician's fallacy": "We need to do something, this is something, therefore we need to do this"

But unless what is offered is credible, concrete and substantive, it is liable to do more harm than good, as it won't cut through with the voters it is aimed at, while also cutting through - and being cut to ribbons - by internal activist opponents.

Therefore, I have changed my initial view a little and now agree with my learned co-author [@ProfSobolewska](#) - Labour's patriotism problem is real, but any offer on this that lacks credibility and authenticity simply won't work. And finding a more concrete offer is tough /ends/

Here's [@ProfSobolewska](#) 's earlier thread on this: <https://t.co/UkAsyflvGq>

Labour's plan to focus on flag and patriotism to win back voters is unlikely to work, for several reasons, based on my recent book *Brexitland* with [@robfordmancs](#) (if you have a copy chpt 5 and 7). Short thread 1/6
<https://t.co/rzpF4702Pf>

