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JONATHAN ASHWORTH
AM: First of all, do you essentially blame ministers for what’s going on?
JA: Yes. This crisis of this magnitude was entirely predictable and indeed entirely preventable. Remember, Andrew, we’re now in the eighth year of tight austerity on NHS finances. We’ve seen community health services cut back, we’ve seen a reduction in district nurses, we’ve seen a reduction of around 14,000 beds. In many community health services, because they’ve been privatised, money is actually going to private companies, not the front line. And we’ve seen savage, deeply savage cuts to our social care sector, which means many elderly people not getting the support they deserve.

AM: So ministers are responsible. Can you remind me who’s in charge of the NHS in Wales?
JA: Well, it’s the Labour government running the NHS in Wales.

AM: And when’s the last time in Wales that the NHS hit its A&E targets, for instance?
JA: Well, the NHS in Wales is under pressure, but they’ve not cancelled operations like they’ve had to in England. We’ve got a whole month of cancelled operations.

AM: When’s the last time they hit their target?
JA: Well, when was the last time the NHS in Wales was given –
AM: You’re in charge of the NHS in Wales.
JA: Well, I’m not personally in charge. When was the last time the NHS in Wales was given a sufficient level of funding? Remember, this is a government which is cutting the money across the board and is giving tighter financial settlements to the health service in England and in Wales.
AM: I’m going to come onto the funding in a minute, but I’ll just repeat the question, have you any idea the last time they hit their A&E targets in Wales?
JA: They’ve not cancelled operations in Wales, they’ve not had to –
AM: The answer is 2008. That’s ten years of missed targets.
JA: There is no cancelled operations in Wales on a national level like there is in England. There is no what they call black alerts or opal alerts in Welsh hospitals. And they hold a much better record than England has on social care because they’re spending eight per cent more on social care in Wales, and they’ve not savagely cutting the social care budgets like the Tory government is in England.

AM: Let me read you what the Royal College of Emergency Medicine in Wales says about Wales. ‘For staff an emergency department feels like a battlefield. Patient safety is being compromised daily. It’s unsafe, undignified and distressing for patients and their family members.’ And that is Wales under Labour now.
JA: Yes, and if there was a Labour government across the United Kingdom we would be putting six billion pounds extra into the National Health Service, and of course there would be Barnet consequentials which would mean the Welsh health service would get more investment as well.

AM: The second time you’ve mentioned money. Vaughan Gething, who’s the Welsh Health Secretary, says that Wales has eight per cent better funding than England.
JA: On social care.
AM: On social care and health together. So you should be doing better in Wales.
JA: On social care, there’s an eight per cent increase, there’s an eight per cent extra on social care in Wales.
AM: He says spending on health and social care, health and social care in Wales, is about eight per cent more now than England per head, and that Wales is in the best possible position to deal with winter pressures. You haven’t met you cancer targets for ten years, you haven’t met the A&E targets for ten years. On those, on the A&E target, you’re doing worse in Wales than the Tories with less money are doing in England and the SNP are doing in Scotland.

JA: But we’re in an overall settlement for Wales, which is being reduced and cut back and if there was a Labour government across the United Kingdom we would be putting more money into the National Health Service, which would have Barnett consequentials for Wales and indeed, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

AM: Well, let’s come onto the money that you’ve been putting in. Because looking at the IFS assessment of your manifesto, and the grey book, so-called, and what the Tories have offered, there’s only an nought point eight per cent difference. Nought point eight per cent difference in what you’d put in. You’d have a two per cent increase, they’d have a one point two per cent increase. It’s hardly a transformational difference.

JA: Well I think a six billion pounds extra in 2018 will be a substantial difference when you consider that the NHS is going through the tightest financial squeeze in its history and actually on a head for head basis money in England will actually be falling next year. It’s why we have –

AM: We have been offered six billion a single year.

JA: It will be around six billion pounds. I mean in England for 2018 we’ll be spending around 126 billion. They’re spending around 121. It’s gone up slightly since the Chancellor’s Budget announcement so it’s probably around 5 billion extra now for 2018 but it’s still a substantial increase, because we will put forward an
extra £6 billion a year in our manifesto last year. The Conservatives made promises about real terms increases on a per capita basis, on a head for head basis which they’re not going to hit.

AM: Almost every year, and I can remember under Labour as well as under the Tories there is a winter crisis of some kind.

JA: Not on this scale. Not on this scale.

AM: This isn’t – I agree this one is bigger but it happens again and again and again and it appears that we go through this cycle and perhaps at some point, as the papers have been suggesting, we need a different way of funding the NHS, we have to look at an earmarked tax, we have to mobilise public support for the NHS and paying for the NHS in a different way than we are at the moment.

JA: Well, let me just come onto that. But we have not had a winter crisis on this scale for years and years and years and it is because of the cuts, it’s because at local level that we’ve not been able to put the proper management in because the whole Lansley Act which drives privatisation blew apart the local decision making and planning at local level in our health service. And Theresa May comes out and makes – just let me make this point – makes an apology, a sort of perfunctory apology but doesn’t actually change her plans, she hasn’t got a plan to get those people off the trolleys in corridors. Those elderly people this freezing January being treated in ambulances. She’s got no plan for them. Her only plan, apparently, is to promote this Health Secretary. They should be demoting this Health Secretary. If she promotes this Health Secretary tomorrow it is a betrayal of those 75 thousand people in the back of ambulances.
AM: Okay. What I was really asking is whether you have a bigger vision for the NHS that is not about more than a 0.8% increase in funding but is about a different way of doing things.

JA: Well, it is a substantial increase in funding, £6 million in 2018.

AM: Let’s not go back over that, but do you have a bigger picture?

JA: Well yes we do, because to improve health in this country isn’t just about fixing what is happening in our hospitals and our acute sector, it’s about changing the way in which we deliver health out in the community, so we’ve got to get this fragmented system, which the fragmentation which has been exacerbated by Andrew Lansley’s reforms, we’ve got to get health authorities working more closely with the local different Community Health Authorities as well. We’ve got to go back to a system where they’re more integrated. We can’t go down this American style ACO route which the government want us to go down.

AM: And you also want to get rid of all private provision, don’t you in hospitals? Jeremy Corbyn has said you want to get rid of the involvement of Nuffield and these other private groups in operations inside the NHS.

JA: Look, we’ve got a crazy situation where Virgin can win billions of pounds of contracts and when it doesn’t win a contract in Surrey can sue the NHS. It took the NHS to court and forced the NHS to settle out of court. That is money that should be going to patients, not to Virgin Care.

AM: How quickly do you want to get rid of the private provision in the NHS hospitals?

JA: Well we want to do is as quickly as possible, but our priority coming in has got to be to stabilise the service with the funding,
we’ve got to deal with the staffing crisis. We are short of 40,000 nurses. We’ve got vacancies for 100,000 across the NHS. We’ve got to deal with those as well and of course we want to change the structures, we want to get back to more integrated health service at a local level, as indeed Camilla Cavendish is talking about in the newspaper today, as David Cameron’s former advisor she’s recognising that this fragmentation at a local level is not working.

AM: Integration. Getting rid of the private providers, but they are doing about a third of a lot of elective surgery at the moment and some people are worried that if they’re just taken out very quickly there will be a big gap. The King’s Fund says the reason they’re doing all this work is to hit those targets.

JA: Well, actually the targets on elective surgery aren’t going to be hit because we’ve just cancelled them and what I’ll be saying to the government is that if you’re telling hospital trusts to cancel elective operations like he’s done this January, that’s going to affect their deficits going forward as well, because that is where they get money from.

AM: We’re running out of time, so a quick answer to this if you don’t mind. Theresa May is going to say shortly that she’s going to stand by Toby Young. What’s your message to her?

JA: Oh, these tweets from Toby Young are disgusting, offensive, sexist. She shouldn’t – she should show some leadership. She should get rid of him.

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