



Are we really back in the USSR?



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Back in the USSR? Queues return to NHS dental practices in England' was the lead in a press release issued last month by the British Dental Association, after images of patients queuing outside a dental practice from the early hours of the morning surfaced on social media.

The queue, in response to a message on the website of Smile Dental Care in King's Lynn stating they would be taking on new NHS patients from 2 May, drew widespread attention and criticism, with comparisons being made between NHS dentistry in England in 2023 and queuing for a bakery in the Soviet Bloc.

A bonkers comparison to make, surely? Not so fast.

Bear in mind this falls against a backdrop of rail workers, HMRC, passport office staff, teachers, nurses, ambulance staff and junior doctors heading to the picket lines to secure pay rises after years of stagnant pay and rising inflation. Perhaps you have to wonder why it took so long for someone to make the comparison. Cheese and milk prices are rising so quickly I'm wondering if it's high time I bought my own cow – could be cheaper and profitable. Try to get an appointment with a GP and you're on hold for an hour – and that's for the lucky ones who get through.

And this is the point of the comparison. The same sentiment rings true for dentistry. How long before we collectively acknowledge the 'norm' is not being able to secure an

appointment? This is not an isolated incident – the isolated incident is, in fact, being able to get an NHS dentist. I wonder if there was a *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* style golden ticket celebration for those who did manage to secure a place on the list. Imagine the sheer catastrophic state NHS dentistry would be in were it not for fixed patient charges. The supply and demand model would likely mean prices would shoot through the roof with no limit. That's even taking into account the historical 8.5% hike in patient charges introduced in April, with a further 4% increased planned for 2024.

Continuing the Soviet Bloc theme, you also have to wonder if Ministers really are serious about NHS dentistry. The Prime Minister has repeatedly claimed that NHS dentistry is benefiting from more money, more dentists, and a 'new' contract, yet none of these claims are accurate. I could point to a whole host of misleading statements made by Ministers about NHS dentistry, the latest of which came in Prime Minister's Questions on Wednesday 10 May when, in response to questions from Norwich's Clive Lewis, the PM offered misleading lines on workforce, funding and reform which have been repeated, almost verbatim, time and again at PMQs since the start of 2023.

The week before that, the PM failed to respond to questions from Durham MP Mary Kelly Foy on whether NHS dentistry is 'in crisis'. In March he told Bradford's Judith Cummins: 'There are 500 more dentists in the NHS today.' England has fewer NHS dentists in 2021/22 than it did in 2017/18, and thousands are cutting back their NHS work, a shift going unseen in official data

In January he told Lancaster and Fleetwood's Cat Smith MP: 'As a result of the

new reformed NHS dentistry contract there are now more NHS dentists across the UK with more funding making sure people can get the treatment they need.'

In their response, the BDA stated they were unclear whether officials at Downing Street or the Department of Health are responsible for these wholly inaccurate briefings.

Allied to this apparent confusion, there are rumblings of a 'recovery plan' for NHS dentistry, announced by Government in April, an announcement slammed by the professional body and MPs as merely being a 'plan to have a plan', a *Monty Python*-esque People's Front of Judea plan to have a meeting to save Brian, if you will.

Perhaps it is we who have unrealistic expectations. Are we really a wealthy 21st century nation? The economy tanked hard last year, and economic forecasts put our growth below that of Russia (how ironic). A wealthy 21st century nation would not claim they cannot afford to pay these key workers on strike. A wealthy 21st century nation would not be faced with rising inflation, mortgage rates and energy prices, all of which have impacted dentistry in one form or another. And a wealthy 21st century nation would have functioning health systems. Does ours?

Perhaps these lofty expectations really are a fault of ours. I mean, how dare we expect the basics, rather than being misled and being told to be grateful for what we have? The reality of the situation of what we have is akin to the ruins belonging to the *Jungle Book's* King Louis, and the images seen in King's Lynn will, eventually, no longer shock us, for they are becoming the norm. ♦

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41404-023-2017-7>