

## If I Was Minister of Health ...

### An Essay Inspired By Niccolo Macchievelli's The Prince

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If I were Minister of Health in the current government I would be rubbing my hands with glee. What should be a difficult brief, the bane of politicians, the poisoned chalice, is so ripe for harvesting at the moment. For at the moment, and for as long as matters, my decisions are inconsequential and my mistakes are not my own. If I were Minister of Health at the present time, in this present government, I would realize what was ahead of me – opportunity.

The first thing I would do as Minister of Health would be to hold a press conference, as any self-respecting elected official, or unelected Dominic Cummings<sup>1</sup>, would. I would open my press conference with a thank you to the outgoing Matt Hancock. I would thank him for his tireless service to this country and the effort he had put in keeping things together through the pandemic. At least, that is what I would openly thank him for.

In reality, I am tying the poor chap to the outcomes of the pandemic and the upcoming inquiry. While the Prime Minister has already done a good job of saddling him with the blame by making him the face of the pandemic<sup>2</sup>. By thanking him in this way I would ensure the target was thoroughly painted on his back. This ensures that no matter what I do, I will be able to avoid the lion's share of the blame. This tactic has shown tremendous success in the United Kingdom so far; us Conservatives have even managed to blame Labour for our policies and they have not been in power for years!<sup>3</sup>

I am also thanking him for laying the ground work for deflecting blame to the scientists. Those poor scientists who thought they were being invited to help protect the health of our country. They should have realised that we were not going to listen to their expertise. What was that phrase again? Oh right, "the people in this country are sick of experts"<sup>4</sup>. Thanks to Matt Hancock, and really everyone in government, I can continue to blame the science. We have been listening to it from the start and I cannot be blamed for the science being wrong.

This is the beauty of being a previously unknown minister who has been elevated to the top level. Just as Rishi Sunak – everything he does as Treasurer is seen as brilliance (even though it is secretly Labour policy). That is because the expectation of him was to flounder and crash spectacularly. As long as I do not make a colossal hash of the entire thing I will be absolutely fine. Even if I do make a hash of it, I will probably stick around long enough to do what actually matters. To do what I need to do. What I need to do, if I was Minister of Health, is make sure that when I leave, I make as much money as I can. This has to happen fast because there are so many ways that I could lose my position, for example getting kicked out by the Prime Minister for outsmarting him (see – Julian Lewis)<sup>5</sup>, resigning in impotent rage at being outmanoeuvred (see – Sajid Javid)<sup>6</sup>, or getting voted out after being involved in a corruption scandal (see – Robert Jenrick if we are being optimistic)<sup>7</sup>.

The opportunity for profiteering in healthcare has never been higher than at this moment. Which is why, if I were Minister of Health I would be salivating, while simultaneously looking for the ideal tax haven. Firstly, the existence of the pandemic allows me to funnel money basically wherever I want without any scrutiny whatsoever<sup>8</sup>. This is important since it can help guarantee me a cash flow in the future when I move into lobbying. As such, one of my first jobs as Minister of Health will be to

ensure any PPE contracts continue to be directed towards my friends in high places, particularly any which work at Serco. This goes double for any large-scale projects like a track and trace app.

I know what you are going to say though – why should we continue to give contracts to companies that have shown<sup>9</sup> time<sup>10</sup> and again<sup>11</sup> that throughout<sup>12</sup> history<sup>13</sup> their strength<sup>14</sup> is failing<sup>15</sup> upwards<sup>16</sup>. To that end I gesture violently to Chris Grayling<sup>17</sup>. He and these companies have a key thing in common – they know how to massage egos and money in the correct direction. As such, if it enriches me, which as we know is the ultimate aim of any proper politician, I have no qualms over giving contracts to these companies.

That is the long game and realistically I could probably do this whenever I wanted. However, there is a juicy new limited time opportunity that I want to seize as the Minister for Health now - Brexit. As such, my second job is to make sure I have got a seat at the table for any United States/United Kingdom trade talks for a post-Brexit trade deal. That way, I will be physically close enough to receive some very tempting donations from American healthcare companies allowing them entry into the market. Which is very much something that I can do since, coincidentally, I am not allowed to protect the National Health Service during these trade agreements legally<sup>18</sup> (most delightfully that extends to any other foreign interference so imagine the opportunities that open from China, Russia, and anywhere else!)

I will however come to a crossroads – having already protected my future in lobbying and pocketed money from lobbyists to spend now, the question becomes, what do I do with any remaining time in my tenure? I think at this point I won't draw inspiration from any of my recent predecessors. I'm going to be a scapegoat like Matt Hancock, and I'm going to try not to make anybody angry like Jeremy Hunt managed to – particularly since I do not hold strong views or any ideology I would want to push. I hold particular ire for Jeremy Hunt because his ideology was based around becoming incredibly rich by privatising the UK National Health Service<sup>19</sup>, a much more difficult way to actually get rich than what I'm doing. Remember, the true politician isn't in this because of ideology or belief – they are in this to get rich and to have an easy life.

To keep the gravy train rolling, realistically I need to get a different brief – something that either has a lot of financial opportunities through construction companies or land barons like Housing Minister, or that will allow me to exploit financial opportunities with the financial or service industry like Treasurer. The best way to do this is to take down my opponents. Now, this may seem more difficult than just doing a good job but that would only be true if my opponents did not have any obvious public weaknesses.

If we turn our attention to my strongest competitor it would almost certainly be the Treasurer. The Treasurer overall has quite significant power, making them a threat, but this threat is doubled by the fact that he is a popular and charming Conservative that hasn't made a fool out of himself. His role however is extremely weak due to two things. Firstly, he is more popular than the Prime Minister, which means that he is on thin ice already. Secondly, he is in charge of all the money and everyone from politicians to the public quickly turns the people in charge of the money. To get rid of him all I need to do is turn the public against him.

Step one is to publicly lament that without proper funding we are not going to manage a coronavirus second wave on top of flu season. This sounds dangerously like Labour territory (and it is) but it serves two purposes. We still need those first time Conservative seats in the previous Red Wall (renamed the Blue Smear) and this plays well with them. Also, and more importantly for my power grab, this puts our Treasurer in a particularly tricky position. Either he gives me carte blanche to

spend as much as I want, and I spend at an eye-wateringly high level of money (for the Conservative party, which translates to enough to pay for roughly three extra nurses and maybe one more doctor if we can find any) thereby infuriating the more fiscally conservative Conservatives, isolating himself within the party. Or, he refuses and becomes the figurehead for every single failure that happens during a second wave. No matter his choice, I win. Checkmate Chancellor of the Exchequer!

Now realistically that leaves me with Dominic Cummings as the main threat to power. The difficulty with him is that he has shown that he is made out of Teflon to such a degree that he could almost certainly deface a national monument on live television and he still would not be sacked. This is a problem I do not know if I can solve quite yet – at present my hope is he continues to make everyone hate him so much he loses his power, the Hoskyns effect if you will<sup>20</sup>. To that end I am going to have to push him to be a bit more public-facing, possibly even do another catastrophic press conference. The tactical leaking of internal communications about him and the spurring of mistreated employees to sue might help to that end. I will continue to think about this issue.

To summarize, if I were Minister of Health I would look forward to the next year as a year of almost infinite possibility. I would take steps to make myself as wealthy as possible as quickly as possible, while also investing in a future source of income. I would then push forward to insulate myself with power for a long lasting life. If the government I was part of would be voted out, even then I would not be too concerned – I would make a fortune out of being an agent provocateur. I guess, ultimately, all I would do is exactly what the rest of my supposedly “right” and supposedly “honourable” would do, and I would not get caught.

Oh, and if I eventually found myself becoming Prime Minister I would struggle through a single push-up and not do much else<sup>21</sup>.

Well, not exactly, since I am not the model of a politician. Unfortunately, I have chosen to go into medicine instead. Which means I have learnt from colleagues and patients about what it actually means to provide healthcare and what is necessary. I have also learnt from those around me the importance of integrity and of holding values. I even respect my duties as a doctor and remain properly bound by a minimum standard of behaviour<sup>22</sup>. So if I were Minister of Health I would try to make a difference with adequate funding, decisions shared between managers and healthcare staff of all levels, protection from privatisation, and a million other ideas but would end up sacked within a week!

A note: This satire and its views are quite clearly my own. I hope this does not tar me as a political theorist nor does it lead to my last name as a synonym for political deceit as The Prince did for Macchievelli. Wear a mask, stay safe. And if you do go into politics, only take the ideas from the bottom paragraph of this essay please.

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