

Has Wes Streeting done a 'Ratner'?

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Wes Streeting has [taken to saying things](#) like 'The NHS is broken'.

He does not say this is all the fault of Tory underfunding, although there are some swipes in that direction.

Instead, what he implies is that this is the result of the failure of NHS management and staff to increase their productivity. He hints, as a consequence, that increased productivity will be expected of them in the future.

He never notes that the bottlenecks preventing such things from happening are almost wholly beyond NHS control. Those external factors include the chronic underfunding of social care so that people cannot be safely discharged from hospitals, and the massive health problems created simultaneously by big sugar that wants to drive the UK population into ill health through vast over-consumption of highly addictive ultra-processed, and big pharma that wishes to over-medicalise the resulting conditions without pointing out that many of them are treatable or preventable if only we were better fed and drank less, neither of which is almost ever mentioned by a politician seeking to retain favour with both such groups.

The result is that, [as the FT notes](#):

The UK is facing a worrying fall in applications by mature students to study strategically vital professions such as nursing and teaching, the head of the country's university admissions service has warned.

Jo Saxton, UCAS chief executive, said ahead of the release of A-level and BTec results on Thursday that while university applications from 18-year-olds were the second highest on record, the mature student market was struggling.

"The bit that concerns me is the decline in applications from mature students and, particularly, interest from that cohort in the kinds of courses that the nation really needs more of — so anything healthcare-aligned, nursing in particular, and teaching,"

Saxton told a webinar organised by the Higher Education Policy Institute think-tank on Tuesday.

And, we need such applications: they provide the highest-quality admissions to these professions. So, the question is, why is that?

There are two obvious answers. One is the underfunding in both services, but especially the NHS, knowledge of which is now widespread, and about which it is clear Streeting intends to do nothing of consequence.

The other is that I think Streeting has done what is called a 'Ratner'. This is named after an event in 1991 when Gerald Ratner, the then CEO of his eponymously named jewellery chain, said to a conference of the Institute of Directors:

We also do cut-glass sherry decanters complete with six glasses on a silver-plated tray that your butler can serve you drinks on, all for £4.95. People say, "How can you sell this for such a low price?", I say, "because it's total crap."

Overnight he destroyed the credibility of his business by suggesting what it was selling was worthless. That is what careless, throwaway comments by bosses that undermine the efforts of those who work for them do.

It is my suggestion that this is exactly what Streeting has done. He has blamed NHS staff for the faults of the organisation they work for, very few, if any, of which have anything to do with them.

He can obviously do that: it is within his rights. But it is also exceptionally unwise. People do not want to work for organisations that blame them for failings that are not their responsibility. They know they will be abused as a result: that attitude is built into the comment from the outset.

The appeal of an undervalued and undermined NHS, which is the consequence of its treatment by successive governments, is failing when it comes to staff recruitment. Wes Streeting should think before commenting again, but I doubt he will. It's almost as if he has another agenda.