

Doctors, strikes and the failures of Wes Streeting and ...

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The confirmation that resident doctors will strike over Christmas was entirely predictable, as [Roy Lilley has noted in his NHS-related daily email today](#).

An 83.2 per cent vote to continue action, on a solid turnout, signals confidence and discipline.

But what is also clear is that this is not just a labour dispute, as Wes Streeting is trying to claim, or a disgrace, as Keir Starmer would have it. This is a dispute about who is responsible for a system already stretched close to breaking point.

Doctors are very clear that it is not them, and with good reason.

They are equally clear that the failure is on the part of successive politicians, all of them sharing the same austerity culture.

The public has no difficulty deciding who to side with in this case: doctors are not the problem, and are the ones seeking the solution to it.

The public blames politicians who are now trying to pin the blame on doctors for an NHS crisis of Labour's own making, which attempt is backfiring as a result.

Wes Streeting has compounded the problem. He has chosen belligerence over negotiation, framing a pay dispute as a test of authority and repeatedly warning of NHS collapse, winter crisis and patient harm. Christmas was supposed to concentrate minds. It has not. Instead, each supposed “final” position he has suggested has quietly expanded, revealing successive weakness on his part rather than strength. The doctors know they have him on the run.

This is ultimately a credibility failure. Exaggerated threats, shifting red lines and hostile briefings may win headlines, but they corrode trust. Once trust is lost, negotiations become endurance contests rather than problem-solving exercises. That is where this dispute now sits, and the BMA has outmanoeuvred the government as a result.

The NHS will almost certainly muddle through the strikes. Trusts are well rehearsed. Elective work will be cancelled, rotas simplified, and Christmas capacity reduced as it always is. If the apocalyptic scenario does not materialise, as is likely, Streeting's authority weakens even further, and for all the rhetoric, there is no clear indication as yet that the UK is suffering a serious flu crisis this year; it may be nothing more than normal, but just earlier than usual.

Doctors are, admittedly, consciously trading public goodwill for bargaining power, judging pay erosion to be the greater threat. But this dispute is no longer really about Christmas or even pay. It is about who runs the NHS, how fragile it has become after years of neglect, and how quickly Number Ten realises this needs to be resolved through respect, negotiation and competence and not confrontation.

The problems are that:

- * No.10 can't sack Wes Streeting right now, even though he is hopelessly out of his depth and has grossly mismanaged this dispute by making it personal.
- * No.10 has also made it personal, which was a gross error of judgment on their part.
- * Labour has, as a result, nowhere to go but lose, as they are bound to do.

What a mess.

And we, and doctors, are paying the price for yet another government that has no clue how to negotiate anything.

Tickets are now on sale for the Funding the Future live event in Cambridge on 28 February. [Tickets and details are available here.](#)

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