

# No one wants to talk about the real scandal of our time

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At any given moment, there exists at least one delicate subject that all mainstream political parties would much rather not discuss. For many years the abuse of MPs' expenses fell into this category. After this was exposed by a *Telegraph* investigation, everyone joined a tacit agreement to keep quiet about the criminality inside the Murdoch newspaper empire.

Now the subject which nobody wants to talk about is the National Health Service. It is just over a week since the publication of the Francis report into Stafford hospital, where some 1,200 patients died in appalling circumstances. Had any other institution been involved in a scandal on this scale, the consequences would have been momentous: sackings, arrests and prosecutions. Had it involved a private hospital, that hospital would have been closed down already, and those in charge publicly shamed and facing jail.

Astonishing to relate, nothing has happened. Politicians have made perfunctory expressions of concern, while agreeing that there must be "no scapegoats", and that Sir David Nicholson (the senior figure responsible) must remain in his job.

Then, almost at once, the political class turned its attention to a far more lively subject: horse meat. Few "scandals" in living memory have carried less significance. And yet few stories have dominated the press quite as comprehensively since rival teams of crack reporters from *The Sun* and *The Star* pursued Blackie the Donkey across Southern Spain in 1987, in the wake of some dubious allegations of mistreatment by his Spanish owners.

British politics has been almost entirely dominated by the horse meat scandal for more than a week. It would be foolish to dismiss its importance outright. The food manufacturer Findus, which has owned up to selling horse as beef, was recently acquired by a private equity company. Private equity, which depends on debt finance, is open to the serious charge that it puts short-term profit ahead of standards and long-term reputation. These concerns, which were raised by the Labour MP Tom Watson in the Commons last week, certainly need to be examined.

The saga also brings home the extent to which British food manufacture is now controlled by European regulators. This fact explains the enjoyable irony that the Environment Secretary, Owen Paterson, notoriously the most Eurosceptic member of the Cabinet, has devoted the last week to mobilising his mainly

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*The horse meat affair matters not a jot. The interesting question is why the deaths of more than 1,000 people in an NHS hospital have been ignored*



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unsympathetic and inert European counterparts to mount some form of collective action against what certainly does look like an cross-border conspiracy to defraud consumers.

But all this needs to be put in to perspective. Not a single life has been lost, or even threatened. Indeed, so far as I can discover, no one has even fallen ill as a result. By comparison with the tragic and terrible events at Stafford hospital, the so-called horse flesh scandal does not register. It matters not a jot. It is beneath insignificant.

How to explain, then, the contrast between the recent, obsessive interest in horse meat and the near *omertà* surrounding Stafford? First, we need to grasp something important about modern media and political discourse: prominence is only very rarely the same thing as importance.

Second, there is a certain type of sentimental British do-gooder who, while relatively indifferent to human tragedy, is captivated by dumb animals. These do-gooders have been much to the fore over the past week. Consider the utterly false and inverted set of priorities at Staffordshire County Council, which (as we know from the Francis report) sat on its hands while hospital patients were dying in agony.

Staffordshire County Council has been among the first to jump on to the horse flesh bandwagon. Courtesy of the current issue of the *Staffordshire Sentinel* we know that the local council, so negligent and dismissive over the local hospital, has ordered that beef should not be served at the local school as a "precautionary measure", even though it poses no threat of any kind to human health.

The Labour Party - like Staffordshire council, useless when patients were dying - has been leading the national hysteria. Mary Creagh, shadow environment secretary, has made a series of inflammatory remarks which have added to the alarm and confusion. Some of her claims (such as her assertion that 70,000 horses have been unaccounted for in Northern Ireland) have been not merely inflammatory but also grossly inaccurate, as Ian Paisley expertly exposed in his Commons intervention last Tuesday.

In defence of Ms Creagh, Anne McIntosh, the

Conservative MP who chairs the environment select committee, has been equally excitable on her extensive tour of TV studios last week.

In the face of all this, No 10 has panicked. I understand that the Prime Minister's media machine has been briefing its favourites in the press against Mr Paterson almost since the crisis began, accusing him of complacency and not going on television (a briefing that has been systematic and vicious enough to draw a formal protest from Iain Duncan Smith, an ally of Mr Paterson, in Cabinet on Thursday).

In truth Mr Paterson is the only politician to have emerged well from what is, in essence, a bogus political storm. By background the manager of a Shropshire leather factory, and the anointed successor of the late John Biffen, Mr Paterson was probably inoculated at birth against the restless, metropolitan turbulence that has characterised both the political and media discourse about horse flesh.

His handling of this issue has been sensible and unflappable, offering all the right reassurances while refusing to panic. Far from being "slow to get a grip", as Ed Miliband, in his invincible ignorance, claimed on Friday, he was quick off the mark to galvanise the Europol meeting on Wednesday.

That is all that needs to be said about horse flesh, at best a minor affair which will be forgotten in a few weeks. The really interesting question is about the NHS, and why a story about what was effectively the manslaughter by the state of more than 1,000 people has been ignored.

What we have here, I believe, is a conspiracy of silence, just as we had a conspiracy of silence over phone hacking and over MPs' expenses. None of the mainstream parties want to admit the blindingly obvious fact that there is something very wrong with the NHS, as Stafford demonstrates in the most tragic and horrifying way. Labour can't or won't admit this, because it founded the NHS and claims it as its own. Likewise the Lib Dems are bound into this consensus. The Tories fear it would be electoral suicide to do something serious about it.

Nigel Lawson famously remarked that the NHS is the nearest thing we have these days to a state religion. Nobody can criticise a state religion. It's much easier, and far more agreeable, to pretend that horse meat is the big story. Psychologists would call the events of the last week "transference". And if British politicians (of all parties) carry on changing the subject, the more certain it is that there will be fresh Staffords to come.

