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## UK's Covid Vaccine, and a Fake Competition With the EU



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As the UK stumbles towards a no deal Brexit, the Tory government becomes increasingly desperate in its attempts to show that the UK is much better than the EU, whether as a collective or with respect to its individual members.

Claims made by Tories on this issue border on the delusional.

The education secretary, Gavin Williamson—whose career peaked when he was Fireplace Salesman of the Year in 2006 and 2007 (before he entered politics) — has claimed the UK is the first country in the world to approve a coronavirus vaccine for clinical use because the country has “much better” scientists than France, Belgium or the US.

The buffoonish Williamson said he was not surprised the UK was the first to give the vaccine clinical approval because “we’re a much better country than every single one of them”.

When asked on LBC radio whether Brexit was the reason for this world-first, Williamson snapped-up the opportunity to put his foot in his mouth last Thursday: “Well I just reckon

we've got the very best people in this country and we've obviously got the best medical regulators”.

“Much better than the French have, much better than the Belgians have, much better than the Americans have. That doesn't surprise me at all because we're a much better country than every single one of them, aren't we?”

Williamson did not seem to make his remarks in jest, but even if he did, they came barely 24 hours after Matt Hancock, the health secretary, said the UK was the first to approve the vaccine “[because of Brexit](#)”.

Hancock, nick-named “Door Matt” in the media because of his servility towards BoJo Johnson, contrasted the UK approach with the “pace of the Europeans, who are moving a little bit more slowly”.

Hancock's claim was contradicted both by the prime minister's office and the UK's medicines regulator.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA), which is in charge of approving the vaccine for the European Union, also issued a statement saying bluntly that the UK had prioritized a speedy roll-out over winning the public's trust so that it could be the first to give the vaccine official approval.

Williamson, warming to his task, then elaborated on his claim about the UK having “much better” clinicians than other countries by saying it was “able to get on with things”, a remark conforming to the Tory talking-point that Brexit was needed because the EU's regulatory mechanisms are wrapped-up in red tape.

Asked a second time on LBC whether he meant that Brexit was responsible for the UK's achievement, Williamson said: “I think just being able to get on with things, deliver it, and the brilliant people in our medical regulator making it happen means that people in this country are going to be the first country in the western world – in the world – to get that Pfizer vaccine”.

“A real competitive advantage. But do you know who it's down to? It's down to the brilliant clinicians in the regulator who've made it happen so fast, so our thanks go out to them. By doing what they've done, they're going to have saved lives.”

The government's boast about vaccine's roll-out said it had taken place under a provision of the 2012 Human Medicines Regulations, which permits the speeded-up licensing of pharmaceuticals in the event of an emergency such as a pandemic.

The UK is still under the authority of the EMA until the end of the Brexit transition period on 1 January, and EU laws permit member states to approve medicines for emergency use without EMA authorization.

At a [government briefing](#) last Wednesday, the head of the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Authority, which made the decision, dismissed the claims made by Williamson and Hancock, saying that the MHRA was simply following EU rules. “We have

been able to authorize the supply of this vaccine using provisions under European law, which exist until 1 January,” said June Raine, the MHRA’s chief executive.

BoJo’s Johnson’s spokesman also declined to back his health minister when asked to do so. BoJo’s seeming reluctance to engage in gratuitous points-scoring over the EU may have to do with the fact that negotiations on a post-Brexit trade deal between the UK and the EU are deadlocked, to the point where BoJo himself will now conduct talks with Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission. Ms von der Leyen is not likely to be impressed by witless claims about Ukanian superiority.

As is well-known, the Pfizer vaccine was developed by 2 children of Turkish immigrants in Germany, and manufactured in Belgium by an American enterprise (Pfizer).

The only major part the UK will play in its production and distribution (apart from vaccinating members of the public) will be using Royal Air Force planes to bring it to the UK— as a result of the new Brexit border controls, which require extra levels of customs and immigration red tape, Ukanian ports are about to be jammed by vehicles coming over on ferries.

The bragging by ministers about the vaccine may be intended to draw attention away from 2 discomfiting realities.

The first is the continuing high Covid death rate—the UK now has a total of 61,245 deaths from the virus (the highest in Europe).

The second is the continuing bonanza of cronyism and nepotism in the handing-out of public funds for Covid-related procurement.

The non-profit Good Law Project has brought several lawsuits against the government for misuse of public funds, and last week [announced](#) the date of the first court hearing:

“Following permission being granted in our PPE cases earlier this week, we’ve now heard that we’ve also been granted permission to bring our challenge against the lucrative public affairs contract given to long-time associates of Michael Gove and Dominic Cummings at Public First.... The [court] hearing will be [on 15] February 2021”.

This misuse of public funds is starting to receive more coverage in the media, and it’s not doing the government any favours.

A [poll](#) conducted by King’s College London and Ipsos Mori found that 51% of the respondents believe the government’s handling of the Covid crisis has been a “national humiliation” — twice the number of those who disagree (26%). The poll also found that 57% of people do not trust the government to control the spread of the Covid virus.

No wonder “anonymous sources” in the Tory party are saying that BoJo is likely to be gone sometime in the new year.

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