LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Winter of content at DHSS?

JOHN WARDEN

The winter of 1987 blew itself into the weather records before the new year was barely a fortnight old. Whatever the real emergencies created by the Siberian conditions, the newly returned Commons scarcely waited to be guided by the facts.

Next to a sterling crisis nothing excites Westminster so much as a winter crisis. To prove the point the subject of an opposition day debate on 14 January was changed at 24 hours' notice from an attack on the government's economic record to its handling of the winter emergency.

The more midwinter misery the easier it is to make a government stumble. And climatic chaos is always a good opportunity to impute ministerial incompetence, which is exactly how the opposition wishes to portray the present government. After all, the so called "winter of discontent" in 1979 and the fuel crisis of 1974 were capable of bringing down Labour and Conservative governments alike.

At these times the relation between the actual blizzard and the political one is often no more than coincidental. Last week it was the turn of the Department of Health and Social Security to brave the teeth of the political storm. (In 1974 it was the Department of Energy with the three day week, and in 1979 it was the Department of the Environment with the dead unburied.)

Putting a government on the defensive

In 1987 the topical concerns are hypothermia, severe weather benefits, and sheltering the homeless—all of them matters calculated to put a government on the defensive. Thus it was that the weather beaten old DHSS became the lead department. In political terms it acquitted itself reasonably well—for example, with pre-emptive action on the first £5 extra heating allowance. The overlap of the health and welfare functions seemed to be seamless and to justify those who favour the concept of the big department rather than the small ministry.

The DHSS came into being as part of the vogue for super-departments. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office was its twin. Can that really be almost 20 years ago? Indeed it can. It was in 1968 that the late Richard Crossman was assigned by Harold Wilson to merge the ministries of health and social security. A separate ministry of health had existed since 1919 with a ministerial pedigree that included Neville Chamberlain, Aneurin Bevan, and Iain Macleod.

Now some 19 years on the Crossman merger, dating from November 1968, remains to all appearances largely unchanged, both in substance and in structure. Outwardly the DHSS still stands, in his description, "isolated and terrible" on its "ghastly site" across the river at the Elephant and Castle. The early hope that the building would improve the area and attract other prestige

offices is unfulfilled. So is Crossman's aim to get "a decent new building" for the department.

Not just physical isolation

The isolation is more than physical, however, because also unfulfilled is the original intention behind having a secretary of state for social services. Hardly anyone remembers that the difference between the holder's title and that of the department was meant to denote the secretary of state's coordinating role over the whole range of the social services rather than the narrower base of social security.

The *Crossman Diaries* recall how Sir Burke Trend, then cabinet secretary, wanted the coordinating aspect emphasised by Crossman keeping his room in the cabinet office—otherwise he would "get immersed in the details of negotiations with the doctors." Crossman, however, failed in his bid to become the cabinet's supremo across the whole home front. Interestingly, the present secretary of state, Mr Norman Fowler, has been refused an executive suite in the refurbished Richmond Terrace building opposite Downing Street.

As things stand Mrs Thatcher wants neither a superminister nor to break up the DHSS. There is no enthusiasm for tinkering with the machinery of government this side of an election. (The Prime Minister believes that merely moving chairs about Whitehall slows down the works.) Admittedly there can be few serious complaints about how Mr Fowler discharges his dual responsibilities, given such budgetary imbalances as £46 billion for social security and less than £20 billion for health.

Leaving well alone

The DHSS seems to work partly because it is big enough to have a federated structure. The fusion shown in the adroit handling of the national freeze up derives from a happy combination of junior ministers who, in effect, run their own ministries within a ministry, which may be a case for leaving well alone.

But there is still an influential school of thought at Westminster that says that the DHSS should be dismantled and broken down into its constituent parts. Response to the winter crisis could have just as well fallen to other departments, like energy, environment, or employment, all of which have overlapping responsibilities for alleviating the misery of the young, the old, or the unemployed.

The argument is that government action on these fronts would indeed be coordinated from the centre by the cabinet office or a new style prime minister's department in 10 Downing Street. The corollary would then be a restored ministry of health able to concentrate exclusively on the needs and development of primary and secondary care. With this change would come also a shift of executive power to the minister and away from the health authorities. The advocates of such a reform are those who deplore the trends of the past 20 years, which they believe have given the National Health Service the worst kind of ministerial control—responsibility without power.

The debate is likely to gather pace. Perhaps the DHSS will reach its twentieth anniversary in 1988, but only just.