LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Manifesto rhetoric and reality

JOHN WARDEN

In an election campaign that is being carefully manipulated so as to polarise the contrasts of prosperity and poverty within British society the National Health Service is everybody's soft target. The first half of the campaign has seen a relentless strategy by the opposition parties to force the government on to the defensive by personifying the Prime Minister as hard hearted and uncaring towards the unemployed, the old, and the sick.

Inevitably in such a context the welfare state, and the health service in particular, becomes a central issue as the party leaders seek to exploit the British public's somewhat idealised notions of the kind of NHS it would like to see and compare it with the equally stereotyped impression of what actually exists.

Look, for example, at what the party manifestos say of the condition of the health service today. The Labour party manifesto, *Britain Will Win*, states: "Labour's proudest achievement is the creation of the NHS. The Conservatives voted against it then. All who use and value the service know only too well how it has been neglected and downgraded by today's Tories."

But that is comparatively mild as against the charge levelled by the Alliance parties. The SDP/Liberal manifesto, *Britain United*, says: "The NHS is in a state of fundamental crisis and malaise. It is suffering shortages and declining standards. Unless a government is elected again which is committed to the ideas and ideals of a national health service, one of the great achievements of 20th century civilised society could be in irreversible decline."

Can they really be talking about the same health service as described in the Conservative manifesto, *The Next Moves Forward*: "We are building a better health service and providing more care for those in need. The health of the British people is steadily improving. Over the last eight years the government has spent more on the health service than any previous government. We will continue to improve it."

Such conflicting views will come as no surprise to mature students of the real NHS, who are aware of the paradox that the more resources it absorbs the less satisfactory the standard of service seems to become. A former health minister in a mood of candid confession told me recently the health service is probably underfunded by around £10 000m, which is the additional sum that would be needed in his estimation to bring it up to a fair standard of medical excellence. Which party is bold enough to promise anything like that? The answer is, of course, none.

Indeed, when it comes to specifics the Labour and Alliance manifestos fall considerably short of their own rhetoric. And on closer study the remarkable feature of all three documents is the extent to which they overlap. Whatever the outcome of the election, you can be sure that in all practical essentials the NHS will remain unchanged from what it is today. Neither structural reform of its administration nor doctrinaire interference with its philosophy is envisaged in any of the manifestos. By and large it will be business as usual for the NHS after 11 June.

There was, of course, no prior evidence to suggest that Mrs Thatcher had any fundamental changes in mind for the NHS were she returned for a third term. The only surprising thing about the Conservative proposals on health is the contrast between the status quo in the NHS and the radical policies proposed elsewhere in the public sector, notably in education and housing. The role of private

medicine does not rate a mention. This inspired a question at the manifesto press conference as to why the Tory health policies were so "wet," and the reply from Mrs Thatcher: "The health service policies are doing very well indeed for all people. We shall continue with them during the lifetime of the next parliament."

The outgoing Secretary of State, Mr Norman Fowler, added that the Tories are "totally committed" to developing the health service and specified three priorities. One is to press on with the £3000m hospital building programme and complete 125 major schemes in the next three years. The second is to expand patient care and bring down the waiting list further. The third is to give greater emphasis to health promotion with new campaigns of cancer screening for women.

Resting on their record

When it comes to putting money where the mouths are the Conservatives rest on their record of raising health spending from Labour's planned £8000m for 1979 to £21 000m this year—an increase of almost a third, after taking account of inflation. The Labour manifesto, under "Investing in Health," contains no costings and makes clear that for the first two years spending on health would be incidental to a "priority programme" on jobs, poverty, and crime. The Alliance parties promise an extra £1000m for the NHS by year five.

On the detailed aspects of how the health service would develop the manifestos share much common ground. Preventive work is popular, particularly women's health care, with computerised recall promised for breast and cervical screening. All of them make appropriate genuflection towards medical staff, family doctors, and nurses (especially the nurses), and promise better community care, with Labour and the Alliance offering a carer's benefit. They agree on giving patients more information and greater choice of doctor and treatment.

Labour is on its own on ending the privatisation of laundries and catering, phasing out NHS pay beds, and reducing prescription charges (the Alliance would raise them in line with inflation). Both the opposition manifestos talk of encouraging consultants to work full time for the NHS. The Alliance alone proposes a ban on advertising tobacco products. The Conservatives emphasise efficiency and good management: "The NHS is not a business, but it must be run in a business-like way."

All the parties are committed to reducing the time that patients have to wait for hospital treatment—"the most widespread concern" (Conservative), "the biggest single deficiency" (Labour), and "no patient should have to wait more than six months" (Alliance). The Alliance suggests how this target could be achieved within the lifetime of a parliament. It would give patients the right to treatment in other areas where there is spare capacity under a system whereby health authorities buy and sell treatment to each other. General practitioners would be linked by computer to hospitals nation wide in order to place their patients. Sounds like good business for the teaching hospitals.

The health sections of the election manifestos do not take long to read. What soon becomes clear is that their promises do not quite live up to the sometimes mawkish posturing of their political authors. What even they realise only too well is that any proposals for the future of the NHS must stand alongside the prospect for national economic wellbeing. That is a test I am content for others to apply.