LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Man of the hour?

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John Moore could be the man of the hour for the National Health Service. He has become Secretary of State for Social Services on the floodtide of a historic election victory, which has refreshed and re-energised the government for a third consecutive term.

At a peak in his career he faces a challenge for which by background and experience he is not unprepared. He is largely a politician of the Thatcher era. He has the good will of his colleagues and those around him. And the surprise to him and others of his appointment has brought a well timed tinge of excitement at the top of a health service that in the election took more than its share of denigration.

He will be 50 this year and thus brings to the job a suitable blend of maturity and energy. Having known him since he became MP for Croydon Central in 1974, I have observed a natural flair and drive restrained by a sense of caution. It will be interesting to see which attribute prevails in the months ahead.

Mr Moore's route through the cabinet to the Department of Health and Social Security was by way of the Ministry of Transport as was his predecessor's, Mr Norman Fowler, who after almost six years at the Elephant and Castle has become Employment Secretary. Incidentally, one of these months Mr Moore is due to move his office from the Elephant to the elegantly restored Richmond Terrace, directly opposite Downing Street. It should help to maintain the momentum of the fresh start.

There are apparently no plans to dismember the DHSS, so the new Secretary of State will need time to read himself into his dual brief. He has new ministers on the social security side, Nicholas Scott and Michael Portillo, so it will be natural for him to delegate health matters to the already battle hardened Tony Newton and Edwina Currie. In the Lords Baroness Trumpington has moved on and the health spokesman there will be Lord Skelmersdale, who has a horticultural background.

It is unlikely that Mr Moore will have formed any intention for radical change in the health service at this moment. His influence will be more to jolly things along, give encouragement, get the NHS a good press, and impart a more positive outlook on health. The only health legislation in sight for the new session of parliament is a non-controversial Miscellaneous Provisions Bill, dealing largely with technicalities.

Soon, however, the pressures will increase in the familiar areas with policy decisions imminent on the primary care review and new incentives for general practitioners to expand the services they provide. Already some Tory voices are urging Mr Moore towards early action—for example, to prevent a possible rift between health service managers and the professional staff. Some want him to go the whole way to refinance the NHS through vouchers and private insurance.

Others suggest that Mr Moore, an enthusiast for privatisation, should explore the possibility of teaching hospitals being able to opt out of regional control. If it can be done with the schools why not hospitals? Or so they ask. More often than not Mr Moore's answer

to a difficult question like that is a disarming smile. It will serve for the time being, but come the autumn the honeymoon will be over.

Election reflections

The result of the "doctors' election" was Conservative 3, Labour 2, Alliance 1, reflecting more by accident than design the national result. The 25 other doctors out of the 31 who contested the general election went back to their wards or consulting rooms with varying degrees of relief or regret at their defeat.

With six doctors in the new parliament the profession is marginally below its average postwar representation. Three were re-elected and three became MPs for the first time. The veterans were Dr David Owen, leader of the Social Democratic Party, and the Conservative party's Sir Gerard Vaughan (Reading East) and Dr Alan Glyn (Windsor and Maidenhead).

One of the three newly elected doctors was a neurosurgeon, Mr Sam Galbraith, of the Institute of Neurological Sciences in Glasgow. He was swept to Westminster on the Labour tide in Scotland, winning Strathkelvin and Bearsden from the Tories. Mr Galbraith is president of the Medical Practitioners Union and a member of the medical campaign against nuclear weapons. His Labour fellow doctor is also a Scot in community medicine, Dr Lewis Moonie (Kirkcaldy). Completing the sextet, the third newcomer is Dr Charles Goodson-Wickes, a former army doctor, who is on the right wing of the Conservative party and steps into the Wimbledon seat given up by the former Attorney General, Sir Michael Havers.

The table shows that since 1959 a total of 232 doctors have contested general elections, and that the 31 who did so on 11 June was the highest figure on record, but also had the lowest success rate. Clearly, doctors are becoming less rather than more effective at getting elected to parliament, and the reason is clear.

Number of doctors contesting general elections by party 1959-87

	Conservative		Labour		Liberal*		Others		Total
	Elected	Defeated	Elected	Defeated	Elected	Defeated	Elected	Defeated	
1959	2	3	4	8		2		1	20
1964	2	1	5	3		6		7	24
1966	2	6	7	1	1	2		5	24
1970	5	5	4	2		5		8	29
1974†	3	7	4	3	1	8		3	29
1974‡	3	3	4	3		10		5	28
1979	2	2	5	2		7		6	24
1983	2	2	2	3	1	8		5	23
1987	3	3	2	4	1	12		6	31

*Alliance from 1983. †February. ‡October.

It is that doctors are too inclined to back losers. Over the years they have flocked to the minor parties, but out of 110 contests only four have been won. Those who fought the Labour or Conservative cause, however, registered 61 wins out of 122 contests. If the medical profession wants to be serious about representation in parliament it will have to get its act together and find more mainstream medical candidates.