LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Making or breaking reputations

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The House of Commons chamber can be a cruel place. Sometimes boring beyond belief, it can be as dramatic and as fatal to the long term prospects of its performers as the gladiatorial circus in Rome.

In recent weeks we have witnessed the spectacle of great ministerial careers being skewered on the sword of political combat. On occasions during the Westland crisis I almost expected the serried ranks of MPs to indicate their displeasure at the performances of Leon Brittan with the thumbs down sign. In the event, his fate was sealed behind the closed doors of a Commons committee room, the Conservatives not being disposed to perform their executions in public.

But observers can usually tell from the reactions of backbenchers—their stony faces, their ostentatious silence, their embarrassed wriggling—how well a combatant has fared. Reputations are easily ruined, but much less easily made, in this forum. A member of parliament who has gained respect through his or her ability in the whips' office or as a parliamentary private secretary—both jobs that traditionally demand a period of silence from their incumbents—can find their world falling apart with one dismal performance in the chamber.

Take the recent case of Mark Robinson, the minister at the Welsh Office who deals with health matters in the principality. He had previously been parliamentary private secretary to the Secretary of State, Nicholas Edwards, before being promoted in the autumn reshuffle.

Mr Robinson's ordeal during Welsh question time was excruciating. Within minutes he had frozen, suffering a bout of the parliamentary jitters during what should have been a routine recital of statistics. He fended off a Labour question about the recent reduction in hospital beds in Wales, which, he said, was almost entirely due to the policy of moving mentally handicapped patients out of institutions and into the community.

He then fumbled two more detailed follow ups, searching frantically through his Civil Service brief as MPs grew increasingly restless. And it got worse. Ron Davies, the member for Caerphilly, complained about a constituent who went to her clinic for a cervical smear to be told to return in three months because the NHS did not have the money for immediate tests. Mr Robinson replied that if anyone had a complaint "he" could go through the statutory channels.

It was an unfortunate experience for an otherwise able minister and was ascribed by his senior colleagues to nervousness and the general atmosphere of crisis surrounding the Westland affair. But it was a vivid example of how the Commons bear garden can expose the inadequacies of the timid, the inept, or even the most talented behind the scenes minister who cracks under the strain of vigorous public examination.

There were no such gaffs from the members of Norman Fowler's admirable and nimble footed health team when they entered the ring for their monthly question time grilling last week.

Needless to say, the Minister for Health, Barney Hayhoe, and his deputy, Ray Whitney, are well armed with Whitehall briefs

covering virtually every contingency. The topics were fairly predictable: community care policy and its progress; cigarette smoking and the negotiations with the tobacco industry; mental health; NHS expenditure; and the Royal College of Nursing's campaign against the Griffiths report.

One exchange, however, provided the Westland battered House with an amusing diversion. Conservative member for Thanet North, Roger Gale, complained that the Canterbury and Thanet Health Authority had had to cancel several operations in December because of the failure of the blood transfusion service to supply hospitals in his constituency. Mr Hayhoe explained that a "seasonal shortage of blood donors" had been to blame. There was sufficient blood for emergencies but historically the number of donors declined over the Christmas period.

Exchanges at dead of night

Some of the more interesting exchanges can take place at the dead of night. The adjournment debate provides members of parliament with the opportunity to sound off about a constituency issue that would otherwise not get a decent airing in parliament. The witching hour has normally passed before the 30 minute "debate" even begins with an audience that could fit into a telephone box.

The observers will usually be the MP (and possibly a colleague), the minister, a whip, a deputy speaker, a smattering of reporters, and, in the public gallery, the odd insomniac who has wandered in off the streets to find a cure. But the adjournment debate is also a means whereby Conservative backbenchers can make known their displeasure with an aspect of government policy without making their criticisms too public.

A typical early morning spat took place last week between Mr Whitney, the parliamentary under secretary at the Department of Health and Social Security, and the Tory MP for Bexley, David Evennett. The backbencher was complaining bitterly about the uncertain future now facing Erith and District Hospital. Bexley, he said, was severely underfunded and underprovisioned. Despite its growing population district waiting lists were increasing against the national trend and an improvement programme had been delayed at least seven years because of cash shortages.

"The lack of funds and facilities has stretched the district to breaking point and the weakest link in the chain—the one I fear will break—is Erith Hospital. Unless action is taken the much needed local facilities at Erith will be lost forever. Sacrificing services has nothing to do with good health care. A campaign to save an improved Erith Hospital is being conducted. It is not partisan; it is a cry from the heart."

Hardly the words of a politician who believes his government's boasts about an expanding health service.

Mr Whitney put up a game defence of the government's record, insisting that the national picture was good and belied the "impression given in the House, by the media and by interests whose objectives are to paint unnecessarily black and bleak pictures of what is happening in the NHS."

On occasions such as this, when the flak is flying from their own benches, ministers must be grateful that not too many people are about to witness their discomfiture.