LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Nurses' views on Griffiths made loud and clear

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The House of Lords today is no longer the powerful legislative chamber of yore, but it still packs a political punch that can leave an unwary government reeling.

In theory, the government of the day can always reverse any Lords setbacks in the Commons, but it does so with great caution. A constitutional game of ping pong, with Bills bouncing back and forth between the two chambers to be amended and reamended, is not advisable save in the most momentous circumstances. The Lords themselves, however, also accept these constitutional proprieties; to do otherwise would be to sign their own death warrant.

They have, therefore, adopted several procedures whereby the government can be given a good old verbal roughing up and leaving it at that. One of these is the unstarred question, essentially a backbench method of inspiring a debate on a specific issue of government policy and ensuring that a minister is called to account for it. The question is invariably phrased in the most polite language, a feature, together with the higher standard of debate, that marks out the Lords from the Commons.

An example of both these traits was evident when Baroness Cox, a Conservative peer and a nurse, took the Royal College of Nursing's campaign for fairer treatment under the Griffiths management initiative into the debating arena of the upper house last week. She made a trenchant speech that will have made ministers realise, if they have not already, that the RCN's grievances are deep seated and sincerely held. There had been some suspicion at the Department of Health and Social Security that the nurses were trying it on, were spending too much money on an unnecessary campaign, and were trying to re-establish a nursing hierarchy in hospitals incompatible with the whole tenor of the Griffiths report.

Baroness Cox lamented the transformation of the matron into the "ghastly hybrid post of 'quality assurance manager' in some districts. Would not Florence Nightingale turn in her grave to think of her respected matrons being reduced to that?" she said. "Such posts retain a chief nursing officer role but they also bring other responsibilities, perhaps such as domestic, catering, and a laundry service. The RCN can welcome some of these, as such functions impinge directly on patient care and on the ward environment for which nurses are responsible, but others are much more dubious, such as responsibility for the ambulance service or for public relations."

In nine district health authorities, however, the chief nursing officer is not a member of the management team and has a purely advisory role with no direct line responsibility for nursing, said Baroness Cox.

Lady Cox conceded that the reorganisation was in its early days, but she cited two examples that gave cause for concern. In one, a specially adapted ward for the disabled was closed and patients moved to the hurly burly of the surgical wards. "In another, notorious, case an administrative decision was made to share a

defibrillator between two hospitals. A defibrillator is a piece of equipment which is needed within a matter of minutes if it is to be effective in saving a life. The manager has since defended his judgment by claiming that a nurse was present when the decision was taken."

It all amounted to "a tale of woe," said Lady Cox. Not only were nurses excluded from the decision making bodies but they remained appallingly underpaid and overworked. "How long will our country go on treating its dedicated nurses like this?" she asked.

The success of the RCN's campaign was evident from the contributions that followed Lady Cox's much praised speech. Baroness Robson, former chairman of the South West Thames Regional Health Authority, said that she had "never imagined that the introduction of a general manager in the structure of the NHS should mean the breaking up of the underlying structure of balanced input from all sections of the immensely complicated body of the NHS." The problems now were such that an advisory ministerial circular to health authorities such as that sent out by the Minister for Health, Barney Hayhoe, was not good enough. What was wanted, Lady Robson insisted, was a demand that management structures must include a nursing representative.

"Time of stress" for nurses

Baroness McFarlane, a nurse and former RCN director of education, declared: "Next year I shall celebrate 40 years of association with the nursing service, both pre and post National Health Service. I do not believe I have ever experienced such a time of stress and such a time of wastage of this government's resources."

She quoted the words of Baroness Trumpington, the DHSS minister in the Lords, at the time of the introduction of the Griffiths proposals in November 1983, to wit, "At unit and district level the chosen manager could well be a nurse. Even if that is not so, nurses will be managed by nurses." More than two years later she was still waiting for that assurance to be met.

It was a somewhat shell shocked Lady Trumpington who wound up what could be an important debate in the chequered and brief history of the Griffiths proposals. She welcomed the chance to clear the air but expressed the government's sadness that the RCN had decided to present its views with such a high profile political campaign.

But Lady Trumpington conceded: "The importance of a nursing input into decision making is of crucial importance, and every step has been taken to ensure that it takes place at every level." Ministers are still, however, refusing to prescribe centrally how the health authorities should make their arrangements at unit level.

Whether that will continue to be the case as the RCN's campaign bites deeper than the government ever thought it would remains to be seen. Labour's former Social Services Secretary, Lord Ennals, said that the man now occupying that post, Norman Fowler, should be informed "pdq" of the concern among nurses and the real possibility that low morale could drive many out of the profession.

After last week's debate that message will have been heard loud and clear over at the DHSS.