LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Stirrings of election fever

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Westminster is in the grip of election fever. That may seem a bit odd as Mrs Thatcher's government still has a good two years left to run. Perhaps "fever" is the wrong word: it is more the hot flush that begins to develop at this juncture of a parliament.

Everyone suspects, and probably rightly, that the Prime Minister will, as she did in 1983, eschew the final year to which she is entitled and give the country a chance to pass judgment on her record in the summer of next year. And that is soon enough to ensure that the favourite topic of members of parliament—attempting to predict the outcome—is legitimately back at the top of the agenda for bar room conversation.

The Conservative party chairman, Norman Tebbit, recently announced several changes at Tory headquarters to put the government's formidable election machine into working order in case it is needed within the next 12 to 14 months. The Alliance parties are also expecting an election next year, and so is the Labour party. To all intents and purposes, the campaign has already begun.

It is the cardinal rule of all governments approaching such a crucial stage of their existence not to do anything irreversibly stupid. Major and controversial reforms can be mooted, even legislated for, but not enacted until after the election, thus leaving it a matter for conjecture as to the precise consequences of the changes. But it is also in the nature of governments that things go horribly wrong just when you don't want them to. Or that however hard ministers try to persuade a sceptical public that their record in a particular policy area merits favourable comparison with that of any of their predecessors, they find no one believes them any longer.

There seems little doubt that over the next year, or even two if Mrs Thatcher runs her full distance, her government will be fighting a losing battle in its efforts to convince voters that the health service has bloomed and flourished under Conservative stewardship. Ministers at the Department of Health and Social Security are among the most frustrated holders of high public office in the land. They have spent more money on the NHS, there are more doctors and nurses, waiting lists have been cut, a whole panoply of reforms has been introduced. It is a list of achievement which Mrs Thatcher never tires of reciting. Yet what is the government's reward? The country seems more convinced than ever that the NHS is going to the dogs. Hapless ministers concede privately that they have lost the propaganda battle over health. One told me: "The big question is, have we lost it irretrievably?" He was at a loss, however, to explain precisely what could be done to regain the initiative. And over the next year or so, the perceived, rather than actual, effect of government policies on the NHS will play its part in determining the outcome of the next election.

There has already, it would appear, been an impact on Conservative support among some of those closest to the service—namely, general practitioners. A recent survey published in *Pulse* of voting patterns and intentions pointed to a definite trend away from the Tories and towards the Alliance. The poll of 405 GPs showed that 20% who voted Tory in 1983 would now back the Social Democratic

Party/Liberal grouping. The Conservatives retain a narrow lead among all GPs, with Labour commanding support of only 6%.

Many doctors, apparently, refused to answer the questionnaire, but younger GPs in particular are deserting the Tories, along with many in the north. As David Alton, the Liberal chief whip, rather predictably wisecracked: "It is just what the doctor ordered."

How much this is a reflection of general dissatisfaction with the government's performance or a corollary of its specific policies towards the NHS is impossible to tell. No doubt the political opinions of doctors are potentially as changeable as those of the rest of the community.

And there are many whose views are just as entrenched; the wretched level of support for the Labour party among GPs is an indication of the social class from which most are drawn rather than a comment on the party's health policies.

Many doctors, one would imagine, welcome Labour's pledge to spend more on the NHS. Labour would also outlaw advertising of tobacco, except at the point of sale, and end sports sponsorship by the industry. They would introduce reforms to help the handicapped, keep hospitals open, pay nurses more, and so on—or so they say.

With an eye on that next election, all the parties are now preparing their policies for inclusion in their manifestos. By the time you read this the government should have at last published its long awaited and much overdue Green Paper on primary care, establishing a framework for the future of the family doctor service.

The SDP has already pre-empted the announcement by unveiling its own plans a few months ago with the promise of a more detailed set of proposals in response to the government's plan. The Labour party has also indicated the areas it would like to see reformed should it gain power. The party would, for instance, scrap the controversial limited list of drugs available on prescription. It wants to reopen the whole question of restricting drug prescribing—which the government claims has saved £70m and more a year since the list was introduced—and begin a new series of negotiations with the industry.

Interestingly, the Labour party would probably impose a limited list of its own, though it would be wider than the one introduced by this government. The party is also drawing up proposals for a salaried general practitioner service, which in its early stages would be confined to inner city areas, where it would be seen as an aid to both recruitment and planning. Labour wants to set up demonstration projects to try out the scheme by encouraging some GPs to switch to a salaried service. On prescription charges, there are signs that Labour has retreated from its original intention of abolishing them altogether and will be content with a promise to cut them substantially.

As in other policy areas so in health, Labour is having to respond to Tory arguments over efficiency and savings. The government may have failed to convince many people that the health service is a fitter institution than when it took office. But two Conservative administrations have so changed the debate about resources and funding that no party can afford to enter the next election promising to spend the earth on it. A more compassionate approach may be claimed by the opposition parties, but they, too, will emphasise the need to get value for money.

In this form at least, Mrs Margaret Thatcher's "housewife economics" are here to stay.