LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Unemployment kills, claims Labour's Michael Meacher

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The government was given a bloody nose at the polls last week, an injury to which incumbent administrations are accustomed and one that is inflicted for a variety of reasons. Foremost among these is a general midterm dissatisfaction with Mrs Margaret Thatcher's performance and a willingness among voters to switch allegiance temporarily, only to return to the fold when the chips are down at a general election.

Many factors come into play. Since the turn of the year the government has lurched from crisis to crisis, giving an impression that the premier has lost her iron grip. The Westland affair, British Leyland, and, most notably, Mrs Thatcher's support for the US bombing raids on Libya all contributed to a widespread disgruntlement that most probably already existed.

Neil Kinnock's new model Labour party has looked a better electoral bet; the Alliance party is always a comfortable midterm option. But come the general election it is not Westland, Libya, and the host of recent controversies that will tip the balance. By then the trusty old issues will be back to the forefront: the economy, law and order, and the welfare state.

Top of the list—as all opinion polls consistently show—is unemployment. It may be the case, and Norman Tebbit is forever reminding us that it is so, that the vast majority of Britons of working age are in a job and are doing very nicely, thank you very much. Inflation is low, mortgage rates are coming down, and the standard of living is higher than ever. If you are in work you've never had it so good. But if, as the polls suggest, more than 70% of the electorate believes unemployment to be the most important political issue of our times, then there is clearly a reservoir of sympathy for the jobless which if tapped could provide a flood of antigovernment votes.

Both the Labour and Alliance parties have placed job creation at the top of their priority lists should they win power, with Mr Kinnock's aims a little more ambitious than those of the Liberals and the Social Democratic party. Both argue that unemployment at the levels seen today is immoral, debilitating, wasteful of resources, and generally demoralising.

Assiduous readers of the *BMJ* will have followed the series "Occupationless Health," by assistant editor, Dr Richard Smith. Those 12 articles, which started on 12 October 1985 (p 1024), left little doubt about the adverse effects of unemployment on a person's health.

The Labour party is claiming that unemployment kills. Indeed, Michael Meacher, the party's chief spokesman on health and social services, has been quite specific: since 1979, he told the North West Trades Union Congress health committee recently, 17 112 people have died "as a result of unemployment."

Mr Meacher said that his figures, supported by medical evidence, uncovered widespread suffering caused by unemployment, deterioration in the health of families expecting and experiencing unemployment, and a massive consequential cost to the NHS of dealing with illness related to unemployment. This year, he claimed, 3000 people will die because they are out of work, a statistic based on data provided by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys longitudinal survey of the effects of unemployment.

Unemployed men are 21% more likely to die than their working neighbours. Their wives, whether working or not, are 20% more likely to die. The main killers, Mr Meacher said, using the same source, are suicide, cancer, and circulatory and respiratory diseases.

He added: "It is not just those who are actually experiencing unemployment who are affected. Insecure employment giving rise to anticipation of unemployment has as devastating an effect on the health of workers and their families as redundancy itself."

GPs see 20% more of families experiencing unemployment

General practitioners have 20% more consultations with families experiencing or expecting unemployment than they do with the same families during times of secure employment. (For this Mr Meacher cited an article in the *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* by N Beale and S Nethercott, Job Loss and Family Morbidity, November 1985, p 510). Referral rates to hospital outpatient departments are 60% higher for families experiencing or expecting unemployment than it is when the breadwinner has a job.

Mr Meacher says that if the average consultation with a general practitioner costs £7.88 (including prescriptions but excluding prescription charges) "the cost to the NHS is astronomical." The NHS will spend £61 million this year on the treatment of the unemployed at their local general practitioner's surgery, and that does not include the cost of treating their spouses and children.

Giving a conservative estimate provided by the report of the select committee on employment of 1982, Mr Meacher said that it suggested that ill health among the unemployed will cost the NHS an astonishing £800 million this year alone. The cost of treating their families will be a further £100 million. Add to that the financial burden of treating a million people who know that their jobs are in jeopardy—cost: £500 million—and Mr Meacher comes up with a grand total of £2300 million.

The Labour party's front bench spokesman defended his findings thus: "All the evidence shows that increased ill health as a result of unemployment is real. The unemployed and their families are not fantasising; they are not hypochondriacs. Unemployment makes people sick and unhealthy, which is not surprising in a society which does not want, or expect, people to adjust to unemployment."

Recent research had shown, declared Mr Meacher, that two thirds of unemployed people were at risk of developing some sort of psychiatric disorder. Those out of work for more than three months had "a fair chance of a minor psychiatric disorder" and psychological wellbeing rose suddenly when people got another job. Those expecting redundancy were prone to rising blood pressure. "It falls rapidly for those who find work again quickly but remains high for those who are unemployed for long periods."

Statistical experts and medical researchers may be able to find major flaws in Mr Meacher's analysis. But to the layman—namely, the ordinary voter—it is a chilling catalogue. The claims appear to be outlandish but even if only half true they can hardly be ignored.

If Labour can make the charge "This Government Can Damage Your Health" stick they may give Mrs Thatcher more than a bloody nose.

Finally, may I apologise for a subeditorial gremlin who on 19 April (p 1089) wrongly attributed a recent poll on GPs' political opinions: it was *General Practitioner* not *Pulse* which commissioned the poll.