LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

London consultants light a political fuse

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Mrs Thatcher's oft quoted pledge, "The health service is safe with us," always threatened to be one of those "sounds good at the time" phrases that inevitably come back to haunt politicians. The spectre is now stalking the corridors of 10 Downing Street and scaring the wits out of its occupant.

Last week the future of the health service and the government's alleged complicity in its gradual decline was once again thrown back to the centre of the political stage. The electoral setbacks for the Conservative party, to an extent caused by general public anxieties about the perceived disintegration of our public services—particularly health and education—have concentrated ministerial minds wonderfully.

The Opposition seized gleefully on the critical letter in *The Times* (13 May, p 13) from consultants in London warning that the standards of health care and the training of doctors were being seriously jeopardised by NHS cuts. The letter lit a political fuse. Here was the proof of what Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, and his party spokesmen had been saying all along: the government stood guilty of damaging the jewel in the crown of "our welfare state," a crime for which it will pay heavily at the next general election.

The accusations rained down thick and fast. Only the sound of ministers collectively banging their heads against the nearest wall in frustration threatened to drown them out. For Mrs Thatcher and her administration are genuinely frustrated and bemused by the attacks.

Have they, as the Prime Minister told the House of Commons, not spent 20% more in real terms on the NHS since coming to power?

Have they not overhauled the management structure to give greater efficiency and value for money to the taxpayer?

Have they not introduced initiatives to improve the lot of patients?

Have they not drummed home the message time and again that a country can have only the standards of public services it can afford?

Are there not more nurses, doctors, midwives, and dentists than ever before—and fewer pen pushers?

If you doubt all this the Department of Health and Social Security will be only too happy to oblige you with the statistics to prove it.

So what has gone so appallingly wrong that the government is being heaped with opprobrium and not plaudits? Ministers blame poor presentation, a failure to get the message across, a deliberate campaign of untruths by single interest pressure groups, and a calculated conspiracy by health administrators to pick the most sensitive health services for cuts.

One senior adviser to the Prime Minister said: "They will as a reflex action close down a children's cancer unit when they find a bit of difficulty with money rather than use their resources the best way they can." Another Cabinet minister commented in the wake of the Tory calamity at the polls: "Something funny is going on in the health service. We spend more money there but get blamed for cuts."

These government sources must remain nameless. But much the same is being said on the record, and with the same touch of desperation. After last week's letter to *The Times* the Minister for Health, Barney Hayhoe, issued an immediate statement defending the standards in London. It was, he said, "simply not true" that the

level of service available in the capital had deteriorated. "There is no doubt that spending in the NHS has gone up dramatically over the last seven years—24% in real terms—and equally there is no doubt that services in the south east have improved, though not as fast as in the rest of the country."

The consultants' letter, Mr Hayhoe complained, was "partial and exaggerated," especially as many of them came from hospitals where fresh resources had only recently been put in. At St Mary's, Paddington, a scheme to provide over 300 new beds plus new operating theatres and outpatient departments was due to be completed next year at a cost of more than £20 million. He gave other examples.

The complaint of the consultants, however, was about the closure of acute beds. Mr Hayhoe did not deny this but insisted that it was only "part of the picture."

"They ignored the progress that had been made providing improved services for the elderly, the mentally ill, the mentally handicapped, and the disabled," he continued. "They ignored the question of general practitioners with which London has been historically underprovided, so that local hospitals have often had to provide primary care themselves."

Minister rejects charge of London's grim future

Mr Hayhoe was also not prepared to accept the charge that the future of hospital medical services in London looked grim. "The future is a future where changes are taking place," he said. "There is a great population movement out of inner London, and people are now demanding services closer to them whether it is in Kent, Surrey, Hampshire, or Essex."

It was an argument put forward by the Prime Minister herself. The RAWP formula would inevitably discriminate against the south east if resources were to be moved north, she told Mr Kinnock, and suggested that anyone who disagreed must be against the policy of reallocation.

Not so, the Labour leader retorted. "Everybody knows the RAWP policy was acceptable everywhere for as long as the NHS was expanding adequately. When it is being cut that policy is a betrayal of the people north, south, east and west."

But there are no cuts, dear Neil . . . etc.

The reality which ministers are beginning to face up to, and it is a nightmare vision, is that no one believes them. They have spent more money on the NHS overall, resources have been increased: but a unit closed in one part of the country, a ward in another, a hospital elsewhere have all conspired to create in the public mind an image of a health service in terminal decline.

Another of those nameless government sources to which lobby correspondents have access suggested that it was only those who rarely or never used the NHS, together with those who have a vested interest in a bottomless pit of taxpayers' money, who were moaning.

But they, too, have votes, and the task of persuading them that all is hunky dory is herculean to say the least. In the final analysis the government has fallen victim to its own propaganda. It was pledged to cut public spending. It has adopted a financial strategy that has restricted growth. "The health service is safe with us" was a boast. The nation has taken it at its word. But the consultants who wrote that unpalatable letter may have lit the fuse that will blow those words apart.