LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

As welcome as Banquo's ghost to Macbeth

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The appearance of Edward Heath in a House of Commons debate nowadays is about as welcome to Mrs Thatcher as the arrival of Banquo's ghost was to Macbeth. He whom she slew has returned to haunt the Prime Minister on many occasions; his intervention is invariably timed to perfection to create the maximum consternation. To switch to a topical football metaphor, the evergreen Mr Heath made a perfect run into the penalty box last week to head home a crashing goal against the government.

He chose an opposition debate condemning the health policies of the government to make what he confessed to be his first speech solely concerned with his Old Bexley constituency in 35 years. As Mr Heath told the Commons, to the glee of Labour MPs, who now look forward to his contributions with some relish, "I find the current position intolerable and I cannot remain silent any longer." He added: "Some of us have held our peace when believing the wrong decisions were taken, but it is apparent that the damage is becoming so great that the facts must be stated."

If some members of the Conservative party's right wing could have their way all mention of Mr Heath would be excised from party records and photographs would be doctored, Russian style, to remove his image. An example of this iconoclastic attitude towards a former prime minister was overheard by an eavesdropper at a Tory gathering during last year's party conference. A particularly bumptious young Conservative buttonholed Mr Heath to inquire: "Could you settle an argument, Mr Heath? Was it three or four elections that you lost?"

Rarely, however, does he lambast the government merely for the sake of getting his own back. His contributions are always meticulously researched, well argued, and constructive. Mr Heath revealed that he had spent "a vast amount of time talking to hospital administrators" and health authority officials to discover the true extent of the damage inflicted in his constituency. The thrust of his argument was not fundamentally different from that of the Labour party, though he stuck to his rule of not voting against the government.

It was, he said, "intolerable that Bexley should have its modern services damaged because new services are going to be made available in other parts of the country." If the government, as promised, was undertaking a review of the RAWP formula then let it be done quickly, he told the Minister for Health, Barney Hayhoe. But he made it clear that he suspects that such a review is merely playing for time; the government knows what action is needed and should get on with it, was his message.

It was, said Mr Heath, essential for the country to apportion more of its wealth to the health service, and the government should sacrifice its tax cutting ambitions to this end. He had some strong words to say, too, about the general management initiative in the NHS. "If I have to go into hospital I do not want someone running the show who has only just left the RAF. Nor do I want someone in charge who is especially good at producing television screens. I would want a good matron, and on that basis I would know where I was."

What Mr Heath proposes is, of course, anathema to the government; manacled as it is to an economic policy founded on "prudent"

financial management, the sheer scale of the spending programme suggested by the former premier is unthinkable. Mr Ray Whitney, the junior health minister, said an extra £8000m would be needed to meet Mr Heath's objective of increasing the proportion of gross national product spent on health from 6.2 to 8.5%.

But the ministers at the DHSS are becoming ever more punch drunk as the blows rain down on them. Mr Whitney said that he welcomed the debate and called for more such cosy discussions "for the opportunity that will give us to nail the lies that Labour members trail around the country."

There is, however, a discernible shift in the counterattack now being launched by the government to wrest the initiative from the opposition. Ministers continue to bang their own drum, insisting that pride can be taken "in the substantial real increase in resources that we have been able to devote and generate" (Mr Whitney).

Attacking Labour's spending commitments

More and more they are turning their sights on Labour's spending commitments in an effort to undermine the credibility of the opposition's policy programme. The ball was set in motion by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Mr John MacGregor, earlier this year when he asked his officials to cost Labour's overall spending plans and came up with the figure of £24 000m extra spending.

It is a statistic that now trips off the tongue of every minister at every opportunity as though it were axiomatic. The government's charge that the country risks substituting prudence for profligacy is hardly being resisted by the Labour party. The opposition's two health spokesmen, Michael Meacher and Frank Dobson, almost vie with one another to make new pledges and commitments for the NHS.

Mr Dobson, opening the Commons debate, said unequivocally: "We promise to protect the NHS, to restore it and improve it. We will change society and attack ill health at its source. We will reduce poverty by the introduction of a national minimum wage and increased pensions and benefits. We will tackle homelessness and improve housing conditions. We will improve health and safety at work, we will make healthy foods available at prices all our people can afford."

Not to be outdone, Mr Meacher pledged that "well women clinics" would be established "in every health district within easy reach of all women of the district."

Every opposition party is tempted to promise every single interest group that its desires will be met when it is in government. But Labour leaders are now becoming anxious that some of their spokesmen are beginning to overcommit the party to spending programmes that will be unattainable, certainly in the early stages of an administration.

The opposition's front bench environment spokesman, Jack Straw, for example, has warned: "Precisely because the scale of demands upon us will be so great, we will need a rigorous system of public expenditure supervision. All projects and proposals will have to be tested on a 'jobs per pound' basis and some groups will be disappointed if we are to achieve our overriding objective. If we promise too much we will not be believed and we will not be elected."