LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Electioneering on the wards

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Those in the profession who hold that medicine and politics do not mix should be advised to take a long winter cruise. A strong whiff of electioneering is in the air and it is heavily charged with the politics of health. In other words, state health provision is firmly identified along with education as the key "doorstep" issue of an election sometime in 1987. It boils down further to hospitals and schools or, if you like, doctors and teachers.

None of that is easily to be guessed from the contents of the Queen's Speech at the opening of parliament next Wednesday. Indeed, no health legislation whatsoever is contemplated. The pre-election battle will be fought not so much on the floor of the House of Commons as in the media and the wards themselves. Argument will tend to be wild rather than wise. Nevertheless, the year ahead is a time for critical decisions by ministers constantly looking over their shoulders at an undecided electorate.

The first of these decisions will soon be known when the annual public expenditure review sets the future level of funding for the health service. What interests ministers about that are the opinion polls indicating, firstly, that most people think that more money should be spent on the health service but, secondly, that over 80% of those who have had recent contact with the service are satisfied with their treatment. The trick is to bring the first closer to the second. The obvious way to do it is to allocate more money to health, if only at the margins. We shall see.

As if in preparation for the electoral contest ahead the Department of Health and Social Security had the biggest shake up in the September reshuffle. In the language of the popular press, OUT went Mr Barney Hayhoe and Mr Ray Whitney, UP went Mr Tony Newton to Minister for Health and Mr John Major to Minister for Social Security, and IN as junior ministers came Mr Nicholas Lyell, and, with a bang, Mrs Edwina Currie (on whom it would be wrong to reach a hasty judgment). Baroness Trumpington continues as minister in the House of Lords, while at the Scottish Office Lord Glenarthur is the new health minister.

A weary general

At their head, a general somewhat weary with his lot, Mr Norman Fowler remains as Secretary of State, breaking records in his sixth year at the Elephant and Castle. It must be said, however, that Mr Fowler shows no outward sign of battle fatigue and clearly retains the Prime Minister's confidence to carry it through. What is more, Mr Fowler's star is rising inside the Conservative party. His up beat speech at the party conference in Bournemouth put him level with Kenneth Baker, Secretary of State for Education, and ahead of Home Secretary Douglas Hurd in the leadership ratings. On these two, Baker and Fowler, repose many Tory hopes for the election and beyond.

One result of health and education being companion election issues is an interesting comparison of the status of teachers and

doctors. At education the immediate problem has been whether to accede to a recommended 16% pay rise for teachers in return for a professional type contract that begins to demand of them something in the educational care of children that doctors accept for the medical care of their patients. A future step, which the government would fondly desire, would be to set up a review body on teachers' salaries, embodying an agreement not to strike.

After all, it worked a treat with the nurses so why not with teachers? Not quite yet: for a start, the teachers' unions in their present state could not deliver the non-strike clause. The common feature of pay review bodies is that they are for groups in the public service who on principle are reluctant to strike—doctors, nurses, the armed forces, judges, and, yes, members of parliament too. Teachers, it would seem, have some way to go before they can claim the modern badge of professional status, a pay review body of their own.

No surfeit of legislation

Whatever banana skins lurk in the Commons for the new session, a surfeit of legislation will not be among them. The government's business managers want the decks to be cleared by next July ready for a possible October election—hence an absence of health legislation. In practice this means that Warnock stays on the shelf. Warnock, of course, is shorthand for a comprehensive law to govern the ethics of embryology. It is not hard to see why the government has no nerve for it in a pre-election year. If Sunday trading could not pass Warnock would need the sterner resolve of a government with a fresh mandate. That does not exclude the subject from private members' time, though the odds would be heavily stacked against success.

Already in the dog days of the session just ended the Commons gave leave to Tory MP Mr Ken Hargreaves to introduce a second version of the Unborn Children (Protection) Bill, which would prevent experimentation on human embryos. With time running out it was no more than a gesture, though if the voting means anything the majority in favour of the Bill is declining. It was 100 votes this time compared with 172 for the second reading of Mr Enoch Powell's similar Bill. Taken together, however, and with no double counting, the two votes indicate that 329 MPs of all parties—a bare overall majority—are against Warnock.

But if Warnock or other medical Bills are given a miss this time there will be no lack of health topics to be raised. There is the consultation process on the government's primary care proposals. Apart from the DHSS's own consultation roadshows, Renée Short's social services committee is also hearing evidence from a whole raft of interested parties. There is also the package of proposals for improving the career structure for hospital doctors. Though put together by Barney Hayhoe, Mr Tony Newton's predecessor, and the profession's leaders, Tony Newton has now taken the package on board and discussions are continuing. Parliament will no doubt be hearing about progression on that later in the session.

And even before October was out the Prime Minister came under fire from the Labour benches about deaths from hypothermia. The temperature outside was 61°F.