LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

A divided "elephant" under Labour?

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The Department of Health and Social Security, housed in that architectural masterpiece in the Elephant and Castle, is an unwieldy brute. Its titular and political head, the Secretary of State, Norman Fowler, will inevitably be hard pressed to keep an eye on everything that goes on in his domain. Immersed as he now is, and has been for nearly two years, in the Thatcher government's wholesale reform of the social security system, it is the health side of his portfolio that gets the least of his attention. But a politician to his shoelaces, Mr Fowler will delegate responsibility only up to a point. Although health matters are the primary jurisdiction of the minister, Barney Hayhoe, his decisions and announcements have the imprimatur of the boss.

Spare a thought then for Labour's health and social services team, which has to shadow this massive department. They have no vast battalion of civil servants to advise them, brief them, or shoulder the burden of alternative government. There are the unsung heroes, the research assistants and secretaries, who keep the show on the road, alerting their political masters to issues that may grab a headline or embarrass a minister. They are on hand for House of Commons question time, sitting in reserved seats on the floor of the chamber itself, hoping that their man does not make a pig's ear of it in this most public of forums. They arrive in the parliamentary press gallery laden with speeches, statistics, statements, written questions—a ton of bumf over a year, which, as they are painfully aware, is all too often destined for the wastepaper bin.

Voracious Westminster machine

The voracious Westminster machine, however, has to be fed; a few stories spewed out the other end is reward enough, particularly if they find their way into the columns of the national press. And supplying the daily diet for the complete range of all those interested parties in the arena of health and social security is less within the capacity of one shadow minister in opposition than it is for one minister in government. So the Labour party, until recently, carved up the responsibilities between a team of spokesmen under the command of Michael Meacher, MP for Oldham West.

Although his predilection was for social security matters, he jealously guarded the health side of his portfolio, leading debates for the opposition and acting as its chief spokesman on major government statements. Things have changed, however. The Labour party holds annual elections for the 15 senior front bench posts which comprise the parliamentary committee, more popularly known as the Shadow Cabinet.

Mr Meacher, despite fears in his camp that his vote was under threat for reasons of internal party politicking, fared well. Indeed, he increased his vote, confounding some predictions that the stand

he took in the Labour party's national executive committee to back his leader, Neil Kinnock, against the president of the National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Scargill, could cost him dear.

The making of Frank Dobson

The Shadow Cabinet poll was also the making of another member of the health and social services team. Frank Dobson, the literally bouncy—and virtually always cheerful—health spokesman, was suddenly knocking on the door of the party's innermost sanctum. He tied for the last place on Mr Kinnock's top table; and although the consequent run off against Aberdeen MP, Bob Hughes, went against him, Mr Dobson's political star was in the ascendant.

To all intents and purposes he is now the untrammelled health spokesman for Her Majesty's loyal opposition. The official Labour party list of front benchers still describes Mr Meacher as the Shadow Cabinet member responsible for health and social security. But that is because the job he shadows has that title. Mr Dobson has so encroached on the health territory as to make Mr Meacher's contributions look like a gesture for old time's sake.

It is Mr Dobson who now directs the policy initiatives of the party. He it was who recently took the wraps off a Labour investigation into the regional provision for treating infertility. He has taken up the cudgels against the government's poor funding of medical research. And he has under his wing a committee opposed to private medicine called NHS Unlimited, which he established in 1982 and which recently issued its twenty second briefing paper.

The next major debate on health will be led by Mr Dobson—unless Mr Kinnock decides, as he did once in the past, to take on the task himself. But it is unlikely that Mr Meacher's diminished role is an intentional slight, though some may like to portray it as such. It is as much a reflection of his own workload in coming to terms with the Fowler social security reviews, which will be relaunched in a policy White Paper early in the new year. It is also a recognition of Mr Dobson's enhanced political status, his energetic promulgation of party policy, and his aptitude, which is doubted by none.

The new arrangement may also be something more. The aforementioned unwieldiness of the Department of Health and Social Security is a matter of concern for many. A future Labour government, certainly if Mr Dobson had his way, would split the two.

A divided "elephant" would suit the respective ministers too in their inevitable negotiations (despite Labour's best intentions) with the Treasury over funding. Mr Fowler, for instance, wearing two hats, can succeed in a spending battle for the social security side of his budget only to find the health purse strings pulled tight instead. Two ministers, fighting their own corners, might manage to squeeze a few extra bob out of their paymasters. Furthermore, a divided DHSS might also have to abandon the Elephant and Castle roundabout for less grandiose—and perhaps more convenient for Westminster—ministerial surroundings.

Few who work there would lament their departure, I suspect, though Mr Fowler might cast a fond eye on a building that has scrawled on various parts of the stonework the initials NF. Volunteers are being sought to tell the Secretary of State that these are not the doodlings of his fan club but the graffiti of the National Front.