LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Radicals versus consolidators

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Radical Thatcherism, in its purest form, has been put on ice, perhaps to be brought out of suspended animation should the Prime Minister win a third general election. Consolidation is now all the rage among most Cabinet ministers. Its proponents contend that the reforms of the past six years, and those planned for the next 12 months, have established the government's radical credentials.

There has been an extension of home and share ownership, a massive privatisation programme, a promised overhaul of the social security system, and sundry other measures designed essentially to undermine the political base of the Labour party.

The consolidators believe the time has come to settle down and avoid the controversy that any further departures from the cosy Butskellite consensus of the 1960s and 1970s would inevitably bring. They count among their number the Leader of the Commons, John Biffen, who sneaked out of the radical camp under cover of darkness some 18 months ago to emerge carrying the standard of the pragmatists.

There is, however, a hard core of right wingers, mostly among the 1983 intake of members of parliament, who are determined to keep the embers of Thatcherism aglow. They are the true heirs of the New Right, led by Mrs Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph, which hijacked the Conservative party in the wake of Edward Heath's two election failures in 1974.

"No Turning Back"

Recently a group of 13 Conservative MPs produced a pamphlet called *No Turning Back*, seen by some as a first shot in the battle between the radicals and consolidators over the next election manifesto. There is a familiar ring about many of their policy ideas; a year before the last general election a report from the now defunct "think tank" had to be put down at birth when its contents were leaked before ministers had had a chance to excise the more hair raising proposals. But many of its suggestions for the future of the National Health Service have been resurrected in the new pamphlet and could well be the shape of things to come in the third Thatcher administration.

The radicals take as their starting point the view that the major proportion of funds made available to the health service should be spent on patient care directly. Cash increases, they fear, might be sucked toward non-medical areas—such as the wages of cleaners, porters, and administrators—without achieving any increase in the level of care provided. Not surprisingly, they argue that the root of the problem is the NHS's immunity to direct consumer pressure. "Those who receive health care are also those who pay for it, but because the payment is made through the tax system they are unable to exert the same kind of consumer pressure that they can bring to bear on supermarket shopping, for instance."

The allocation of funds has become a political matter, "there being more votes in making large numbers comfortable than in providing vital care for the few." The authors of the pamphlet go on to call for private medicine to be actively encouraged by lifting the £8500 earnings limit below which health insurance premiums are

tax deductible. The programme of contracting out hospital cleaning and catering should be speeded up, private management teams brought in to run an efficient service, and the savings passed on to the medical budget.

Health service hospitals now being closed should be sold to the private sector, boosting the total number of beds available and increasing the spread of high technology medical equipment. "The private sector should be seen as a partner, not a threat, to the NHS," the MPs insist. "It can take the pressure of demand away from hard pressed NHS facilities. It can call extra funds into health beyond the tax level which the government feels able to support."

The group meets head on the inevitable counterblast that such developments would produce a two tier health system, with only the well off receiving proper care. It is, they say, the present system that is two tier, with its shortages and queues presenting no real obstacle to the articulate middle classes who know how to use it, but providing a barrier to full use by those less fortunate.

The radicals believe that their measures would extend the present health service while retaining the central security enjoyed by all—that no ailment or accident will bring financial ruin as a consequence. It is consumerism in its ultimate form; health care in the shop window. Market forces, that flawless arbiter of what is good for you, should be embraced wholeheartedly. Let the people choose freely where their priorities lie and "the total system of health care in Britain will improve beyond measure."

If the radicals are doing anyone a favour, other than indulging their free market whims, it is to alert us all to the likely direction that a third Conservative government will take.

The Liberal view

Consolidation may be in the air—but only until the next election is safely in the bag. The problems of funding the NHS, now costing £17 000 million a year, will grow as the numbers of old people grow and national income fails to grow enough. But it is not solely in this context that the debate on health care is being conducted. The Liberal party this month published its own policy pamphlet, called *Health is Everything*, which proposes that every government department, from transport to energy, should be duty bound to promote good health. The Trade and Industry Department, for instance, should upgrade health and safety requirements to prevent accidents and increase screening for work related disease. The bankruptcy laws need reform to ensure that individuals who cause damage to health—for example, managers of nuclear plants—should be held personally responsible. Agriculture ministers in a Liberal government would be encouraged to introduce a national policy to promote a healthy diet, tempting people to eat more fish and giving farmers financial incentives to grow healthy food. The transport department would not be left out, with a part to play in accident prevention and extolling the virtues of cycling.

For Liberals, however, there are some rather illiberal proposals. The party's health panel wants to see a school meals service established to provide a healthy diet for pupils, a desire shared by many. But the pamphlet insists: "Junk food should not be available on school premises." What, no tuck? The Billy Bunter of tomorrow's Greyfriar's comprehensive school will be a sylph like, fish eating cyclist who would be well advised not to become a nuclear power plant manager when he grows up.