LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Short shrift for Griffiths from Mrs Short

WILLIAM RUSSELL

The Griffiths report has been given short shrift by the Commons social services select committee, although from reading its report you might conclude that it had given a guarded, tepid welcome to some of what he had to suggest. It seems, however, to use the explanation offered by Mrs Renée Short, chairman of the all party committee, that there are plenty of "hints" to the contrary in its report if you read it. Mr Nicholas Winterton, Conservative MP for Macclesfield, suggested that the committee had used "parliamentary language" when asked to explain why what the members were saying at their news conference was markedly stronger in tone than anything in the report (p 954). It was about as dramatic an event as the day that Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, gave evidence to the committee immediately after Mr Griffiths and changed his tune about the Griffiths proposals almost completely.

What Mrs Short and her colleagues agree on is that what Griffiths proposes on the reorganisation of health inside the Department of Health and Social Security—the establishment of a supervisory board and a National Health Service management board with a strong chairman—ought to be implemented. But so far as the rest of the NHS is concerned, well should be left alone. It seems that consensus management rules. The committee also seems unanimous in agreeing that Mr Griffiths did not know what he was talking about.

That being so, it might be as well to let those concerned speak for themselves. Mrs Short began by saying that the idea of a general manager or chief executive had been raised and discarded several times in the past and was not terribly popular.

"We had a good deal of evidence that everybody is in favour of good management, but not in favour of having another reorganisation to cause upheaval and bring in general managers at every level—regional, district, and unit, as proposed by Griffiths," she said. "If introduced you overturn consensus management which works reasonably well. There is always room for improvement, and we want to see good management in the National Health Service, but we did feel there was every scope possible within the present system."

She said that consensus management was working well in many areas, and the impression should not be given that the NHS was about to collapse because of poor management.

"Griffiths, I think because he really does not understand how the NHS works or how it is organised, has underestimated the difficulties," she added. "We realise it is a very good thing to have good general management in the NHS. We would support that. But we do not want to see the present system of organisation and relationships interfered with."

"We feel the idea of general managers as put forward by Griffiths was not a proposition we could support. We are not opposed to the board to be set up in the DHSS. In that area we feel most the need for good general management to be introduced. But we do not support the plan for line managers, which would interfere with the complex and delicate system of decision making and taking that exists at the present time. There is no reason why someone should

not be identified, but not in the way Griffiths suggests with overall charge or responsibility. We are in favour of consensus management, but with the proviso that good decisions and good management are essential to the NHS. We do not think the Griffiths proposals are the right idea for what is a very complex sort of animal, the NHS."

Mrs Edwina Currie, Conservative MP for Derbyshire South, a new member of the committee, said that she thought that Mrs Short might be putting it a little strongly, but then came out quite firmly and announced that to impose a system as "rigid" as that proposed by Griffiths would be "a mistake." She said that the committee was concerned to see the strengthening of general management in the NHS, but not necessarily through the appointment of general managers, and at unit level that would be premature. The committee's most useful function had been to point out how vague Griffiths was, she added. It had also become clear from their evidence that he and Mr Fowler took very different views about what was needed. "Griffiths took a very strong view of management, a very commercial view," she said.

"The Secretary of State had a much more vague view and clearly saw the role of manager as much more nominal, possibly part time, and in our view that would not work."

Too many voids

Mr Winterton said that a great organisation like the NHS was there to care and cure, not to sell the kind of products which were available in Sainsbury's. "The same kind of system of management cannot apply to the NHS as that which applies to a highly commercial organisation like Sainsbury," he added. "Of course we can learn from Griffiths, but we feel the evidence given by him was extremely vague and the evidence of the Secretary of State as to exactly what was proposed by the report left great voids. We believe that much tighter management is required at the top at the Elephant and Castle, but less is required in the regions, districts, and units. We are saying we believe the general management function could in many cases be carried out within the existing system and establishment and the appointment of separate general managers would cause disruption and would inevitably result in additional expenditure which the NHS could ill afford. This would break down consensus management. You cannot impose over them some kind of god who would dictate to them what they should do. This is a very vague report which leaves a great many voids. We don't want to go out of the frying pan into the fire."

Sir David Price, Conservative MP for Eastleigh, said that the clinical independence of consultants did not fit into a simple mechanistic structure, and it was this that made the NHS different from most organisations where you could get a straight line of command.

Finally, back to Mrs Short. "We are not talking about running a set of grocery stores where you have a fairly recognisable product," she said. "You are selling to the public, you are packaging something. The NHS has a different attitude and is responding to patients' needs."

The likelihood now is that time for a debate on the report will be provided, and Mr Fowler will be under pressure then to clarify some of the things that the committee has identified as being left vague and to let it be known in advance what he has in mind.