LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Stale party slanging match on NHS

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The more things change the more they remain the same. In the week of the BMA's annual representative meeting Labour chose to celebrate the 36th anniversary of the founding of the National Health Service by holding a full scale Commons debate. The main opposition party's motion condemned the government for its failure to provide sufficient resources for the NHS, called for an end to the promotion of private medicine and contracting out, and recognised that what the British people wanted was Labour's approach, not that of the government.

The BMA's meeting provided Mr Michael Meacher, shadow social services spokesman, with the opportunity to call in aid the words of Mr Tony Grabham, chairman of the BMA's council, on the length of hospital waiting lists and the concern felt by the council about very considerable deficiencies in the NHS. He had claimed that "these were a direct consequence of chronic underfunding." The report by the Hospital Junior Staff Committee of the BMA on the impact of the government's cuts on patient care was also called in aid to back up Mr Meacher's indictment of the government.

Fair enough, you might say. Everything is grist to the politician's mill. But next to speak was Mr Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, moving an amendment congratulating the government on its record of increasing the resources and efficiency of the NHS and backing the development of a modern health service giving maximum value to the public as patients and ratepayers.

He suggested that 1978 was a rather more meaningful anniversary. Not only had it been the 30th anniversary of the NHS, it had also been the last year in power of a Labour government, and what was being said then about its policies for the NHS? The chairman of the BMA's council, Sir James Cameron, had been calling for a £1000m injection of money into the NHS and had told the association's annual representative meeting: "The NHS in Britain is sick. It is inadequate and impersonal and it is losing the confidence of the medical profession and the public. The idealism so apparent 30 years ago when the NHS was started has been dissipated by lack of adequate resources." It is, of course, a debating point, and Mr Fowler probably won that round, but it shows the extent of the problem and surely of the failure of politicians to grapple with it. The fact is that Sir James Cameron's indictment could have been uttered last week and nobody would have thought it out of date.

Labour's promise

Mr Meacher's promise is that Labour will reverse privatisation, and that the election pledge last year of a 3% real increase in NHS spending—an extra £500m a year above inflation—is the party's "bottom line." What Labour wants is a health service that is full time for all its practitioners rather than one that is a lucrative adjunct to the private market. "The Labour party will make a reality of community care," he added. "We shall draw up plans for comprehensive health and social services to carry through during the next decade, with general practitioners, community nurses, social workers, and environmental health officers working together in neighbourhood health teams." What is more, Labour would reverse both the too heavy centralisation of power in the NHS and the crude political patronage and blatant partisan loading of health authori-

ties. Community health councils would be strengthened and a real element of democratic accountability injected into the structure.

Mr Fowler, of course, had a quite different vision of the NHS. What mattered was the service provided for patients, and in those terms the government's record was quite clear, he claimed. More patients were being treated and more services provided than ever before in the history of the NHS. Comparing 1978 with 1982, he said that there were nearly 500 000 more people being visited at home by health visitors and district nurses, 30% more total hip replacements, nearly twice as many coronary artery bypass grafts, and more than 50% more kidney transplants.

The Secretary of State admitted that it would be absurd to say that the NHS was without problems, which was wise given that the people who complain about the deficiencies of the service are usually those suffering from minor ailments which they cannot get treated, rather than those needing major surgery. He argued that unprecedented progress was being made in tackling the problems, and whereas under Labour the number of patients treated in hospital annually had risen over its five years in power by one million, in this government's first four years it had gone up by over 2.25 million.

After that things went their predictable course. But the debate did provide a chance for Mr Charles Kennedy, Social Democratic party MP for Ross, Cromarty and Skye, who has been given its health portfolio by "the boss," as Dr David Owen is known. It is Mr Kennedy's misfortune to be the youngest MP, but that does not mean that he and his party do not have a message to impart. He accused the Labour party of being tied to the type of health care which was overinstitutionalised and wanting to keep people dependent on the state, while the Tory party sought to lessen dependency by moving towards a private, insurance based system. As to what the Social Democratic party would do, it would not pledge itself to an unrealistic 3% a year real increase but would limit itself to 1.5%. The treasury's figures demonstrated that an increase of 1% a year was needed simply for the NHS to stand still. Given the economic shambles that would face any party taking over government from the Conservatives, it would not be realistic to try to meet the range of pledges the Labour party was giving.

According to Mr Kennedy, health authorities would have to be given greater revenue raising powers of their own. Within the decentralist programme which the alliance parties argued for, although there would be need for a redistribution of resources formula and an equalisation poll to help disadvantaged regions, the root thrust should be towards greater regional authority and greater regional decision making. Equally, greater emphasis must be placed on preventive medicine and primary care, and the existing joint funding arrangements extended to the voluntary organisations and more democratic accountability must be injected at local health authority level. Then, turning to the attack, he said that the crisis of morale created in the NHS by the government's policies was not helped by the "spurious and often unobtainable promises" made by the official opposition. The Labour party did not improve morale in the NHS because it did not offer a more positive framework within which to argue against what was currently being done and in favour of improvements and raising the horizons of health care.

Mr Kennedy's contribution contrasted somewhat with the rather stale party slanging match that made up much of the rest of what was to come—and what had gone before. He even ended with some lines from T S Eliot:

"The end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."