Letter from Westminster

Review bodies and all that

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The battle over public sector pay is going to dominate the weeks ahead. Just how the various groups settle—or are likely to settle—is a crucial factor in the Budget decision on whether at last it will be possible to implement that election promise to cut taxes. Mr Leon Brittan, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, made as much clear the other day when he was the first Treasury Minister to breathe the words “tax cuts.” He did so, however, firmly in the context of settlements on pay. It is early days yet so far as the Doctors’ and Dentists’ Review Body is concerned, but the signs are that once again its members are working to produce proposals that will not be met in full. That is said not to be deterring them, but yet another partially met award must place the future of such independent bodies in doubt all over again. Interestingly, with this uncertainty about independent reviews looming, nurses, who are far more popular with the general public when it comes to pay than doctors, are talking, albeit a little stiffly, with the Government to try to work out a better way of settling their pay. The trouble is that it is impossible to take pay out of the political or economic arena.

Whatever the DDRB comes up with will have to be seen against the background of a 4% cash limit on the NHS—and against the other settlements. So far most of those appear to be under the inflation rate, and to that extent the Government is able to derive some comfort. But the NHS claims are still to come in. The nurses are seeking around 12%, but what the ambulancemen and others want has still to be revealed.

Another topic likely to feature prominently is the vexed question of a shift in the funding of the NHS to some sort of insurance-based scheme. The DHSS study into what they do in other countries must bear fruit fairly soon, and there are no signs that Dr Gerard Vaughan, the Health Minister, has lost any of his enthusiasm for such a shift in the funding of health care—he has been the driving force behind it all along. Mr Fowler is, of course, rather more intrigued by its potential than was his predecessor, though he will do nothing in advance of the next election. But Dr Vaughan hopes that it could be a vote-catching plan.

Labour is, naturally, opposed root and branch to the idea, and Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, its health spokeswoman, seized with delight on an opinion poll published by the *Guardian* just before Christmas. The findings of the Marplan poll, she reckons, uphold what she has always argued to be the case and she intends to make the most of them in the coming battle.

The poll found that more than seven in 10 people in Britain believe that the NHS is giving value for money, are satisfied with the treatment they are getting from hospitals and doctors, and would prefer the present pattern of provision of health care to most of the alternatives on offer. That is not to say that they believed the NHS to be perfect. Asked whether it was in need of change, 64% said that it was. But when Marplan put the possible options to them there was a marked reluctance to come out in support of any one of them. Asked whether the service should be private, with everyone choosing and paying for the treatment they wanted, 83% turned the idea down—a pretty positive rejection. Only 13% were in favour. Asked whether employers and trade unions should offer private or higher-grade health

care as a “perk” or “incentive,” 47% thought the suggestion good and 41% thought it bad. As for charging for hospital food or accommodation, 59% opposed the idea, 33% favoured it.

Mrs Dunwoody has always argued that people will say that they believe in more private provision of health care and insist that they are ready to pay for it, without ever facing up to the implications financially of what they are alleging. The poll seems to bear her out. Asked whether they were in favour of a dual service in which basic provision would be available for all, with those who chose being able to pay for private care—exactly what Dr Vaughan is on about—46% were in favour, 45% against. That would tend to dispel any hopes that they could be on to a vote winner, especially in the light of the pollsters’ next question. They asked the 46% how much they would be willing to pay, and found that most of them had given no thought to it—54% said they did not know and the rest suggested amounts which would not bring in sufficient revenue to finance private care. It looks, as they say about West End hits, like a set of statistics that is going to run and run and run.

Extremely provocative statement

A rush of business at the end of a parliamentary “term” is a regular Westminster feature. So Mr Keith Wickenden, Conservative MP for Dorking, found that the adjournment debate he had secured on the hospital treatment of mongol children rejected by their parents was going to be held in the middle of the night. In fact, the 30-minute debate, which would normally be held at 10 pm, was held at 9 am the following day. Realising this, Mr Wickenden issued an advance of what he planned to say. In the event, his speech bore not even a passing resemblance to his advance statement—presumably because he learned the response Dr Vaughan was going to make during the time between issuing it and rising to make the speech. But the statement stands and was extremely provocative.

Mr Wickenden began by accusing doctors of panicking parents of handicapped children into unlawful decisions they would regret for the rest of their lives. “Parents of newborn mongol children are terrified by doctors into thinking they are bringing into the world some kind of monster who will be a blot on society,” he alleged. “Some doctors then quite deliberately trade on ignorance and mislead parents and the public into the idea that the child will die because they are ‘withholding treatment,’ using sentimentalised terms such as ‘nursing care only.’”

Nothing, however, could be further from the truth, he claimed. The fact was that doctors were quite deliberately starving and poisoning these babies to the point of death and were as guilty of deliberately killing them with malice aforethought as if they had smothered them. He accused the profession of trying to bamboozle the public into believing that what they were doing formed an acceptable standard of medical care, adding that it was “sheer arrogance from a group of people who seem to take the attitude that they are above the law, and do not want people looking over their shoulders.”

Well, that is distinctly purple prose. Since there is obviously a very importance debate going on about the issues raised, his words deserve a greater airing than they received.