Letter from Westminster

All set for strife-torn August

WILLIAM RUSSELL

The decision by the TUC Health Services Committee to step up industrial action in the NHS with a five-day stoppage from 9 to 13 August was bad news indeed for the Health ministers. Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, is said to be determined to "sweat it out," and it was precisely that note of belligerence that his Minister of State, Mr Kenneth Clarke, hit when he wound up a notably acrimonious three-hour emergency debate in the Commons on the three-day stoppage (p 386). So far as Labour is concerned they have misread events. The argument runs that they have failed to appreciate the reality that lies behind any industrial dispute—the parties have to work together after it is over—and that, as a former journalist and lawyer, they may intellectually understand events, but have no gut appreciation of how a dispute develops.

Certainly neither minister has given the slightest hint of movement on the unions' 12% pay claim. The 6.5% offer is all that is going to be placed on the table, and a steady flow of ministerial propaganda aimed at getting that message over has poured out of the DHSS. It may work, and it may well be that if the damage to patients they keep warning about becomes clear the unions will realise that they are on a hiding to nothing. But it does look as if that resolve to sweat it out will be tested during a long, strife-torn August—and beyond.

New Health Services Bill

Looking forward to the next session, it seems as if there will almost certainly be a new major Health Services Bill. Mr Fowler wants to tackle the problem of transferring the care of the mentally handicapped and some mentally ill people from the health authorities to the local authorities and to transfer resources along with the responsibility. He sees the plan as one that will substantiate the Government's fond claim that it is a caring administration—and such an Act on the Statute Book could also be a handy piece of general election window dressing. The Bill will be more than just another miscellaneous provisions measure, but it will be used for other purposes as well. It will implement the decision to make family practitioner committees health authorities in their own right and the long-promised provision of sick pay for doctors.

One ploy by the Opposition in recent weeks that has annoyed ministers is the way that Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, the shadow Health spokesman, and her colleagues have been spreading the idea that nothing is going to be done about the Acheson Report. The contrary, Mr Fowler is at pains to point out, is the case. They are going to do something this autumn, and the Bill could serve as the vehicle for those changes that require legislation.

The possibility of "buying off" elderly general practitioners working singlehanded from run-down premises in the inner cities—the oldest working GP is said to be 91—with some kind of golden handshake is being considered, if money can be found.

Of the 528 resolutions submitted for the Labour Party confer-

ence, which takes place at the end of September in Blackpool, 57 are on the NHS. The message from the constituency parties is fairly predictable, and the resolution submitted by the West Gloucestershire constituency party could serve for them all. It calls for the integration of private health into the State system and for the Labour movement to "rededicate itself to the NHS and the vision of its founder, Nye Bevan, to provide free health care for all our people, based on medical need, not cheque book power." There are, of course, other demands such as the nationalisation of the drug industry, the removal of all pay and amenity beds from the NHS, the abolition of all charges, an improved system for determining pay, and a commitment from the unions to withdraw from any part of private medical schemes. The implementation of the Black Report is also called for.

Criticism from the PAC

The Public Accounts Committee, chaired by Mr Joel Barnett, Labour MP for Heywood and Royton and a former Treasury minister with a record of cutting public spending, has just published its latest report on the state of the NHS.¹ It is critical of the lack of information collected by the DHSS about the numbers of staff employed in the NHS, a problem that the committee also looked at last year, and remarks that it is not at all satisfactory that the DHSS statistics for such a highly labour intensive service should be at best six months out of date. "Much remains to be done," is the somewhat acid verdict passed. The PAC is also critical of the delays in commissioning new hospitals and of the number of new beds that are left unopened. At present there are 934 beds unopened, compared with 1451 in March last year, and the DHSS claimed that this was a substantial improvement. The PAC remained unimpressed. "We still regard the present position as a significant and obvious waste of resources," the report comments. "In their reviews of health authorities' plans and performances we therefore expect the health departments to ensure that the assumptions on which capital projects are assessed are realistic and provide for new hospitals to be fully commissioned for the outset. We trust that no situation like that at the University Hospital, Nottingham, will be ever allowed to recur." The evidence given by Sir Kenneth Stowe, permanent secretary at the DHSS, showed that 694 out of a total of 1000 beds at the hospital were not available for occupation and would not be fully commissioned until 1985-6.

Mr Barnett said that it was odd to build new hospitals and then not allow enough money for them to be used, and drew attention to the potentially disastrous effects of Mr Fowler's announcement on the new cash allocations for the regions. "There is something wrong with the planning, because one of the ideas of having the public spending exercise is to plan for major programmes like the NHS how much money will be available for a few years ahead, and if in the middle of the year you cut back the money allocated to the regions that creates enormous problems for those planning on the ground," he said. It is a subject the PAC will return to.

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¹ House of Commons. *Seventeenth report from the committee of public accounts*. Session 1981-2. London: HMSO, 1982.