Letter from Westminster

A week of hectoring on NHS

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Some weeks there is an embarrassment of riches in the Commons, and the first week back after the summer recess for the spill-over period before next week's State opening was such a week. Lots of sound and fury, in other words, but just what it all added up to is difficult to say because the rowing was over the pay dispute in the National Health Service and that is outside Parliament's control.

The week opened, as always after a holiday break, with a statement bringing MPs up to date on the industrial dispute of the day. The trouble was that Mr Norman Fowler, the Social Services Secretary, had little to say, apart from reporting on past events, beyond insisting that the Government's £1100m offer on the table for a two-year settlement leading to an agreement on new long-term arrangements was a fair and honourable one. "Regurgitated pap," complained Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, Labour's health spokesman, before dismissing it as "a non-statement." Her problem was that she followed on with a series of what could be called non-questions, and the whole thing fizzled out. Tempers were, however, roused enough for one Labour backbencher, Mr Bob Brown, MP for Newcastle West, to move for an emergency debate under standing order number nine. This procedure, if the Speaker agrees, results in a three-hour debate, either later the same day or, more usually, first thing the following day. Mr Brown got short shrift. The Speaker never gives reasons for his ruling, but the fact of the matter was that Labour had already tabled a censure motion about the Government's handling of the dispute, which was to occupy the whole of Wednesday. That proved too long to wait for some people, and the next opportunity to raise the dispute was seized when Mrs Thatcher answered questions on Tuesday.

This time it was a Liberal who got into the act. Ever since Mr Cyril Smith so spectacularly took up the cause of the health workers at the Liberal assembly in Bournemouth the Liberals have been muscling in on what Labour MPs regard as their territory. Mr David Alton, MP for Liverpool, Edge Hill, asked the Prime Minister how many patients had to suffer and what conditions would have to prevail before the Government sent the dispute to arbitration. He capped that with the now ritual remarks about the Conservatives' intention to dismantle the welfare state, much to her annoyance. Mrs Thatcher, indicating by her tone that she was having none of that from the likes of Mr Alton, said that the Government's excellent record over the welfare state was especially good in relation to the NHS. As for the effects of the strike, she continued: "I condemn any suffering to the elderly, the sick, or children in the NHS. There need be none, and there should be none. It comes about by the decision of a few ill-motivated people in some of the unions. I commend the work of many others in the unions who are carrying out, not only their own work, but that of many others."

The debate the following day was opened with yet another slanging match between Mrs Dunwoody and Mr Fowler. Mrs

Dunwoody's heart may be in the right place, and personally she is a charming and jolly lady, but when she gets on her feet to make a speech Mrs Hyde takes over. Abrasive, tough, sharp, hectoring—she is all these and more—a classic Commons example of how not to win friends and not to influence many people. She opened with a scathing attack on Mrs Thatcher's claim at the Tory conference in Brighton that "the NHS is safe with us."

The Dunwoody sarcasm was boundless, since she is not an ex-actress for nothing. "Safe?" she cried. "The record of three years of Conservative Government shows that the NHS is about as safe in Conservative hands as the Mint would be in the hands of the Mafia. Putting the present Prime Minister in charge of the NHS is like putting Madam Syn in charge of a convent." Then she turned to the future planned by the Government for the NHS. It was that of an underfed, lowly paid, and reduced second-rate service as a substitute for universal health care, she said. Instead of a service free at the time of use in which the assessment should be on need alone, the country would be offered a different assessment—that of people's ability to take out high-quality private insurance. The way Mr Fowler and his deputy, Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Health Minister, had handled the dispute had been a case of constant provocation, massive mismanagement, and misrepresentation.

"Failed utterly," claims Mrs Dunwoody

"He has failed utterly to represent the serious problems of workers in the NHS or to demonstrate any compassion for or understanding of the problems facing patients," she continued. "He could easily have solved the dispute early on by agreeing to go to arbitration. He could have shown a willingness to negotiate, which he has never done at any point. Instead of defending the NHS, he has attacked it. Instead of trying to improve it, he has tried to dismantle it."

Mr Fowler hit back in kind. The speech was unworthy of Mrs Dunwoody, he said, and unworthy of her subject. Then he quoted some of the things Labour politicians had said during the winter of discontent when they were in office and faced with action by the health workers about the impact on patients.

The latest figures for England showed that since the present dispute began more than 130 000 operations had been cancelled, more than 120 000 outpatient appointments had been cancelled, and waiting lists had grown by more than 140 000, he said. That was the toll of industrial action. He also rejected the claim that the Government was out to destroy the NHS, saying that the actual position on spending was that it had been raised from £7750m in 1978-9 to £14 500m today, an increase of 5% in real terms. There were also 41 000 more nurses and midwives employed in the NHS compared with 1979. That was not the action of a Government out to destroy the NHS. It was the action of a Government determined to sustain it.

There was a lot more of the same as the backbenchers took their cue. In the end the Opposition motion of censure was defeated, and that was that. Lots of rhetoric, then, about which Mrs Thatcher, when asked why she would not face the facts about unemployment and change her policies, said, "Because rhetoric does not change facts or produce jobs."