Letter from Westminster

A compassionate rag bag of a Bill

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The slogan this winter for the Government on health is clearly going to be "value for money in the National Health Service," with the rider that this does not mean dismantling it and that the Government is caring and compassionate. It seems that Mr Norman Fowler, the Social Services Secretary, has managed to get his Health Bill included in the programme for the new session. The Cabinet has completed work on the contents of the Queen's Speech for next month's State opening of Parliament (3 November), and, given that there is all that controversy about the future of the NHS, there was no way that this Bill was going to be left out, as it was last year. It is, in fact, a pepped-up version of that long-promised Health Services (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, a bit of a rag bag according to some people at the Elephant and Castle, though that is not how ministers see it. The debates on it, from the general Government point of view, will allow Mr Fowler and Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Health Minister, to fight their corner as guardians of the NHS. In other words, they are telling health authorities only to cut planned expenditure programmes and not inflict real cuts. Because they see the central theme as dealing with the transfer of the care of the disabled, the elderly, and the mentally handicapped from the hospital service to the community the Bill will also serve as proof that the Tory administration really is a caring one. The idea is that the money will follow the patient, and that it will be possible for local government to fund projects with a housing or educational content. There should be little or no controversy about that, as the aim of getting such people out into the community has wide approval.

But it is an all-purpose Bill, and there should be some fair old rows with the Opposition over other parts, particularly the decision to make family practitioner committees free-standing health authorities in their own right, which it will implement. The change will mean that they will no longer have to employ staff on an agency basis, and the Labour Party, which believes that family practitioner committees should be incorporated in the existing health authority structure, will oppose it. The opportunity will also be taken in the Bill to set out a new system of inspection and controls for residential nursing homes and homes for the elderly. There has been considerable controversy about the way some of these homes have been run, and while ministers have no ideological objection to private provision of this kind, and would happily encourage it, they are equally opposed to the unscrupulous or careless "making a fast buck out of Granny," as somebody rather inelegantly put it. The Bill will also clear up the legal doubt over whether health authorities can pay sick pay to doctors suspended on medical grounds, which has been long wanted.

The new session ought also to see action on the Acheson report on inner-city practices. The battle to get the necessary cash from the Treasury has not yet been won, but the chances are that it will be by the time the current public spending negotiations have ended. The negotiations with the medical profession about what should be done are said to have been dragging a bit, the sticking point being the issue of retirement age. Ministers have been slightly taken aback to discover that there are still around half a dozen general practitioners who are over the age of 90 and still practising. They are not all in London, where

conditions are said to be the worst. The problem is to find a way of inducing elderly doctors, who are often singlehanded and operate from run-down surgeries, to retire. Mr Fowler is opposed to exerting pressure by taking away the basic practice allowance, or to influencing a decision by unleashing a massive cash inducement. There will be no bonanza. The hope is for a statement to be made fairly early on in the session.

Establishing manpower targets

Value for money also means better use of manpower. Sir Geoffrey Howe, Chancellor of the Exchequer, made clear what he would like to see happen in a television interview after the party conference. Rejecting the suggestion that the sums concerned amounted to candle ends—he is a thrifty man by nature—Sir Geoffrey pointed out the action taken to reduce the size of the Civil Service. Its numbers have been cut by 10% with a resulting saving of about £500m. It was something like that he wanted to see happen in the much larger NHS, he said. Mr Fowler discovered, when he started to look at NHS manpower, that his department's figures were 18 months out of date. As a result a new system of quarterly returns has been instituted and manpower targets will be established in co-operation with the health authorities. The manpower inquiry, which he announced at the Brighton conference, is part of the fresh look. It will be carried out by a small team headed by people from industry with the remit of results in months rather than years. Another fresh look was the replacement of various chairmen of regional health authorities. The reason was not political, ministers claim. It was to bring in people with business experience.

One way of saving money that is often advanced is the introduction of generic prescribing. That, however, has been ruled out, partly because of the damage it might do to the domestic drug industry, partly because Mr Fowler is not convinced it would work. But economies have to be made in the NHS drug bill and there will be a fresh attempt to persuade the medical profession to stop overprescribing.

The NHS pay dispute, like all wars of attrition, seems for the moment to have reached a sort of impasse. One cannot be too dogmatic about that because miracles do happen and log-jams may break without warning. But the feeling among ministers is that the various days of action—they note the carefully selected locations—are not going all that well, which encourages them in being resolute, another of this winter's Conservative words. There is also the fact that talks with the nurses are still under way, and somewhere or other a little flexibility may have been discovered.

Meanwhile, the Social Democrats have held their conference and outlined their health policies. So far as current events are concerned, they left no doubt of their commitment to the NHS, and on the pay dispute proposed that there should be a new system of arbitration on pay for health workers. The "no-strike" commitment of the nurses would be extended to the rest of the work force in return for a fair system of pay comparisons with other groups. Mr Mike Thomas, the SDP health spokesman, told their conference in Cardiff that the present dispute would leave a legacy of bitterness from which the NHS might take years to recover, and for that reason the Government should send the claim to arbitration.