Letter from Westminster

Couple of cats among the pigeons

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The arrival at the Elephant and Castle of a new Social Services Secretary, Mr Norman Fowler, at more or less the same time as a new Permanent Secretary, Sir Kenneth Stowe, can fairly be said to have set a couple of cats among the pigeons—or, more precisely, the pigeonholes. It seems that there has been a great dusting down of plans and many meetings as the new bosses familiarise themselves with their empire, and the fact that ministers are locked in the annual public spending battle with more cuts being demanded by the Treasury has lent it all an added impetus.

The Department of Health and Social Security has been lucky this last couple of years in that its minister, Mr Patrick Jenkin, had shadowed the subject for three years in opposition. This gave him a sound basis on which to build when he gained the substance, an asset that Mr Fowler, despite a brief spell as shadow social services spokesman several years ago, lacks. But the result with Mr Jenkin by the time the reshuffle came round was that he could be said not to be able to see the trees for the wood. He had become convinced, in other words, that he had done all that was practicable and reasonable in the way of cuts, given the need to protect the structure of the Health Service and his social security empire. That state of affairs, it is said, played its part in his departure for the Department of Industry.

Mr Fowler, however, had acquired as Transport Minister the reputation of doing the sort of things the Prime Minister wanted. During his spell there he hived off various parts of State enterprises for which he was responsible to private hands, and it was this enthusiasm that Mrs Thatcher clearly wanted brought to bear on the activities of the DHSS.

Given a minister asking questions that his predecessor would not have asked because he knew the answers already—thus possibly not learning that sometimes they had changed—and a Permanent Secretary said to be totally different from his predecessor, Sir Patrick Nairne, changes undoubtedly lie ahead. Sir Kenneth, despite a glittering career—private secretary to three Prime Ministers and permanent secretary at the Northern Ireland Office—is also new to the social services field. He is described as more of a broad-brush man than Sir Patrick, who was seen by his subordinates as a man who went in for the detail, rather than the wider, more political approach. Mr Fowler and Sir Kenneth are said to be very much of a mind, and the latter to have a quite acute political awareness—not surprising in one so long at No 10—as well as a set of antennae very much in tune with Mr Fowler's.

It would be wrong, however, to think that a couple of mad axemen were on the rampage. Mr Fowler has taken no steps to dispel the image of Thatcherite hawk with which the public was presented on his appointment. He may even enjoy it, and for the moment such a reputation does no great harm. But so far he has not done anything in the job to sustain it and is giving every sign of being prepared, within reason, to fight his corner against the Treasury. The starting point, however, is that the minister responsible for the largest slice of Government spending—the DHSS budget is about £27 000m—must make a major contribu-

tion to the latest demand for more savings. The key phrase, therefore, is “within reason.”

But that said, he is making clear to his officials that he will do nothing that will damage the essential structure of the NHS. Some indication of his philosophical approach to his job was given in a speech he made last month to the Birmingham Chamber of Industry and Commerce. He said: “I am not attracted by the suggestion that massive new public investment is the answer to our problems. If by yielding to the pressure for ever more public spending we simply stoke up inflation then we would have served no one. What I believe is a far more hopeful approach is to seek private investment. The best option is to move industries altogether from the public to the private sector—an outstanding example came this week with the National Freight Corporation. An additional option is to move parts of State industries into the private sector. The next stage must be to find ways of getting private investment into public projects and State industries.”

Apply that approach to the NHS and the options are obvious, though for the moment the only programme to be given a shot in the arm is the search for NHS land surplus to requirement that can be sold off.

Efficient apparatchik

Mr Fowler's career since he entered the Commons in 1970 has been one of steady, if unspectacular, progress. His ability is not in doubt. He is, frankly, an efficient apparatchik with a talent for setting out an argument clearly and concisely. His presentation is good but he lacks charisma as a politician and has no party power-base. If Mrs Thatcher sacked him tomorrow she would be losing an able minister but she would not be sending a guerrilla leader to the backbenches. At Transport, unlike possibly brighter colleagues elsewhere, he made no mistakes and carried out his remit successfully, hence the elevation at 43 to the DHSS.

He is, of course, not the only new arrival at the DHSS. Sir George Young, the junior health minister, was shunted sideways in the reshuffle to Environment and has been replaced in a straight job swap by Mr Geoffrey Finsberg. Sir George was nothing if not a crusader. Mr Finsberg is the sort of politician who will do his job quite well and gets along because he does not make too many waves. The change of personality has meant a marked change of approach, nowhere more obvious than in the fact that the tobacco companies have been given a reprieve. Both Mr Jenkin and Sir George were at the end of their tether over the way the industry was behaving about its advertising practices. Mr Finsberg, however, does not believe one should use the legislative weapon to crack that particular nut.

Another new face at the DHSS is that of Lord Elton, a former history teacher and junior minister at the Northern Ireland Office, who will be spokesman in the Lords. The new Mental Health Bill will start its passage through Parliament there for timetable reasons. The word is that already Lord Elton is showing a considerable grasp of the subject. He is described as very bright, and that is not something those whose job it is to stand and wait on their political masters often say about them.