Letter from Westminster

Health becomes a campaign issue

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The hidden issue of the National Health Service pinpointed by Dr David Owen early in the election campaign duly surfaced. The NHS was used by the Labour party to launch the second phase of its campaign after it had become clear that disarmament was not working and that the Conservative party's case on why the government is not to blame for unemployment was proving difficult to overturn. It was on the second Saturday of the campaign when Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, Labour's health spokesman, gave a foretaste of a draft circular prepared by the DHSS that she alleged proved that the NHS was under threat. When things got back to normal after the bank holiday she and Mr Roy Hattersley at Labour's morning press conference proceeded to cast grave doubts on just what lay in store for the NHS. The tactic worked.

The Prime Minister had, of course, been careful, as I tried to show last week, to keep the issue clearly in the list of subjects she dealt with in her speeches. But it was there more as a "for instance" than as an important statement of policy. The government's first reaction to what Mr Hattersley and Mrs Dunwoody had to say was to field Mr Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, at a hastily arranged news conference. The Labour charge was that the draft circular proved that the NHS was in danger from asset stripping and from the private sector. Mrs Dunwoody said that the Tories had decided that the NHS was too expensive and were going to make it more and more difficult for the NHS to operate without a private service. Mr Hattersley condemned the circular as "a putrid document"; it was, he said, an official document, not one of the intellectual exercises for which Mr Norman Tebbit was so widely famed. It was a set of decisions taken by ministers. Mr Michael Foot, the Labour party's leader, joined in, declaring that if the Tories got their way and carried out their plans the NHS would cease to be a national service and would be more concerned with money than health.

Mr Fowler, dismissing it all as "a monumental own goal" by Labour, claimed that they had got their facts all wrong, though that was not surprising where Mrs Dunwoody was concerned. It was not a secret document. It had been circulated to every regional authority chairman in the country, and what was more, he was about to publish it that very day. Calling Mr Hattersley and Mrs Dunwoody "a couple of political tricksters," he went on to argue that all their allegations were self evidently untrue. "It is grotesque to describe ideas for tackling local waiting lists or allowing the NHS to use high technology equipment as an 'attack on the NHS,'" he said. "It is seeking to bring additional help to patients."

Mr Fowler accused the Labour party of seeking to deceive the public, arguing that no rational person could come to the conclusion that the document was a plan to dismember the service or that it destroyed the caring image of the Conservative party. As for Mr Hattersley, he knew little about the NHS, and, it seemed, Mrs Dunwoody knew even less. "It is time she stepped down," he declared. "Her wild statements on this document

follow her disgraceful and tasteless outburst last month when she accused the Conservative party of preparing its own 'final solution' to the problem of the sick and the elderly. It is impossible to take seriously such a person."

Prime Minister joins in

A good old slanging match, to say the least. But just in case Norman Fowler did not get the message over, Mrs Thatcher also joined in. She had one of her major campaign speeches scheduled for that evening and she used it to launch her defence of her government's record. She recalled her claim that the NHS was safe with the Tories when she spoke to a rally held in David Steel's old school in Edinburgh. "I have no more intention of dismantling the NHS than I have of dismantling Britain's defences," she added. "And if you look at our public expenditure plans for the next three years, there it is in black and white. These are the figures: £700m more this year, another £800m next year, and another £700m the year after that. Labour knows these facts. They are in the book. All budgeted for within a sound financial policy—a firm commitment."

She called for an end to Labour's cruel, callous scare designed to frighten the sick and the elderly. She said she despised such tactics and would answer by giving the facts. When the Tories came to power in 1979 Britain had been spending £7750m on the NHS; this year £15 500m was being spent. That was not undermining the NHS, it was doing better than Labour had done. As for dismantling it, there were now 56 000 more nurses and midwives and 7000 more doctors and dentists in Great Britain than in 1979. She also accused Labour of having said the same things in the election campaign of 1979. It had not worked then, and it would not work now because this time the Tories could point to their record in government, she claimed.

The row served its purpose—Labour got her on the defensive at last. But because it happened to coincide with a slight movement in support for the Social Democrat party and Liberal Alliance it also prompted a change in tactics by the Conservatives, who had hitherto more or less totally ignored the Alliance to concentrate on the Labour party. Suddenly a vote for the Alliance became a serious matter, with Mrs Thatcher warning that if Labour came to power on 9 June it would either be because people voted for them or, and this was the greater danger, because they thought it safe to give "other parties" a chance.

I am not sure that as an issue this will run and run because in the end the decisive argument must be about unemployment and the future of the economy. But it served last week to provide something new to shout about—and elections are about shouting about things.

The row also produced one lovely revelation. Amid all the talk about the private sector at Mr Fowler's news conference somebody thought to ask whether he belonged to a private health insurance scheme. He does not. Nor was he prepared to discuss the matter. It was almost the final question put to him and left him visibly smouldering. Politicians, after all, really ought to practise what they preach, especially at election times.