Letter from Westminster

Independent FPCs: Labour's price for health Bill

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In politics everything has its price, and the price of Mrs Thatcher's 9 June election was a large chunk of the government's legislative programme. The convention is that when an election is called the Opposition allows on to the Statute Book the essential legislation—the bits of the Finance Bill needed to implement the Budget proposals that came into effect straight-away—and other measures that are not politically controversial.

Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, Labour's health spokesman, seized her chance and insisted that, if the government wanted to get the Health and Social Services and Social Security Adjudications Bill through, the proposals in it to make family practitioner committees health authorities in their own right should be dropped. It is the part of the Bill that she has always opposed and made clear a Labour government would repeal. She got her way, much to the annoyance of the medical profession, the BMA in particular being very upset. Indeed Dr John Ball, chairman of the General Medical Services Committee, lost no time in seeing Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Health Minister, to express the BMA's "strong concern" at what had happened. Mr Clarke gave him an undertaking, which he later put on the record in the Commons, that when the government returns to office it will reintroduce these provisions at the earliest possible moment in a new Bill, and that it will be pushed through parliament as quickly as possible. So it may well prove a temporary victory for Mrs Dunwoody.

"We did not think it a good idea to hive off family practitioner committees from the rest of the National Health Service and I am delighted it will not now be possible," she said. The so called independence for family practitioner committees, including the power being taken by ministers to appoint 29 out of the 30 members, would have paved the way for future plans to privatise contract work in primary care and introduce cash limits, she added. But their plans were now dead. At least, for the moment, and when Labour got back it would therefore be far easier to start rebuilding the primary care system.

As for Mr Clarke, he said: "We remain convinced that the family practitioner services would benefit most from being administered by, and under the aegis of, independent, free standing committees whose sole concern and objective is to develop the primary care services that are the National Health Service's first line of contact with the public. That remains the fundamental position, and we hope to press on with what we believe to be the desired policy as soon as we are returned to office."

Just how that will be done, we will have to wait and see. It must depend on a suitable vehicle, but there is the Binder Hamlyn report on the financing of family practitioner committees to come, and it could be that a family practitioner committee Bill implementing its proposals on ways of controlling or re-

organising how they spend their money could be combined with the lost sections of the Health and Social Services Bill.

The future of the NHS is clearly going to be one of the topics much mentioned over the next few weeks of the election campaign. The Prime Minister makes a point of including the government's record on health every time she is challenged about her achievements, and it was one of the plus points she included in her speech to Tory backbenchers before they left for the hustings. There is every sign that Labour has managed to make the running on the threat to the NHS posed by the Conservatives.

The attack is made over and over again by Mrs Dunwoody and others that the NHS simply cannot survive another term of Conservative government, and that the Tories have already made plans to guarantee its death. It runs like this: "They have been working towards the death of the NHS for four years now. They have crippled the NHS with cuts. They have given tax concessions to private health in preference to the NHS. They have started to hive off sections of hospital support services, even when the NHS did the job more cheaply. They have begun to charge overseas visitors—and the 19 pages of regulations are in fact a blueprint for a charging system that will be imposed on everyone after the next election." No doubt this is one of the "scares an hour" that the Prime Minister warned her backbenchers about—which is not to say that scare stories do not sometimes come true. Anyway, Mrs Thatcher insists, as ministers do, that spending on the NHS, even allowing for inflation, is at a record level and there are more doctors and nurses than there were under Labour.

Labour's pledges for health

The Social Democrat/Liberal Alliance was the first to issue its election manifesto. The Alliance declares that it is wholly committed to sustaining and strengthening the NHS, placing increased emphasis on primary care and preventive medicine (see p 1655). The Conservative manifesto has yet to appear and Labour's manifesto (page 1655) has turned out in the end to be the campaign document, *The new hope for Britain*, issued earlier this year.

It apparently seemed easier to preserve Labour party unity—Mr Roy Hattersley, for instance, agrees with some 80% or 90% of the contents—to stick to its carefully drafted text than embark on the problem of slimming it down into something that would be ideologically acceptable. The document pledges Labour to reduce inequalities in standards of health care, to give greater emphasis to prevention, to develop services for those who need long term care like the mentally handicapped, the mentally ill, and the disabled, and to introduce an independent complaints system in both hospitals and the family practitioner services. It also makes clear that private medicine under Labour will be cut back. It is considered to be a serious threat to their priorities in health care, and Labour has no intention of allowing a two tier service where the rich can jump the queue to come about.