Letter from Westminster

On the campaign trail

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One of the aspects of a general election campaign that the voters never see is the way that a party leader's speech grows and grows in performance. The point is that the actual audience at each rally hears basically the same speech, but with sections added to highlight the issue of the day. Gradually these sections take over the whole speech so that the audience at the final rally hears it in all its perfection. But the voters at large never do. The most that they get is the issue of the day as reported in the press or on television. One of the things that keeps those hapless souls like me sentenced to what amounts to three weeks' hard labour—following, in my case, the Prime Minister around—is watching “the speech” take shape, and noting that what went down well in Birmingham fails to move them in Slough. Election tours are a time out of reality for the press who follow, since we are never in touch with events, only in pursuit of our politician. The text of the speech, or at least the extract for the day, is usually issued by party headquarters to the resident political corps in London, although now and again we might get our copies a little earlier. So we journalists have to while away time that may very well be unproductive in terms of getting something into the paper.

The Thatcher tour has been dubbed “Gulliver's Travels,” since by a happy coincidence that is the name of the pilot who captains the chartered BAC-111 that takes Mrs Thatcher, her entourage, and the travelling press, as we are known, around the country. On land we travel in a fleet of buses. The pace may be quite hectic, and there are days when little things like lunch simply slip past unnoticed—even by Prime Ministers.

So far it looks as if Dr David Owen, the deputy leader of the Social Democrats, is being proved right and that health is the hidden issue of the campaign. It has certainly not surfaced in the way that defence or unemployment has, nor would I expect it to. But I expected perhaps a little more argument, more debate, more charge and counter charge than there have been. “The speech” has not altered much over the days from its basic form. This goes: “No government since the war has done more for the disabled. We promised to maintain spending on the National Health Service, and the 45 000 extra nurses and 6000 extra doctors are witness that we have more than kept our promise. Those extra doctors and nurses made it possible to treat two million more patients than Labour ever managed. Hospital waiting lists are now lower than they were under Labour, despite last year's futile strike, and we're designing new hospitals. If that's dismantling the NHS then Sir Christopher Wren was a demolition contractor.”

But Mrs Thatcher's concern is not in doubt, it is what happens next that is not clear. She clearly thinks that over the

period of her government Labour has managed to make the running on health and that her record must be defended. In the impromptu speeches during her whistle stop tours she always raises the issue and defends that record in the most vehement terms. “We have honoured our promise to the NHS. We will continue to sustain the NHS in the way we have looked after it over the last four years. I want to make that absolutely clear because I know people are worried about this,” she said on one occasion. Then again, she said: “We decided to give priority to the NHS and you can see from our record that its future is safe in our hands.” And later: “The NHS is safe with us. No one can argue with the facts. We have to let them speak for themselves.”

There do not seem to be many worries in Mrs Thatcher's mind about the outcome of the election, but she is not a lady who likes to have her success, as she sees it, unfairly criticised, hence all the rhetoric about the Conservative record on the NHS. She does not, however, promise anything specific, which is intriguing to say the least.

Influence of journalists

One problem facing the politicians in general elections is that, although they may choose the issue of the day for their news conference each morning, it is the journalists who dispose. All too often they run merrily off in quite the wrong direction, leaving the carefully prepared statement on rates or council housing or fee paying schools stranded in limbo. Proof that you cannot manage the news totally was given when Mrs Thatcher summoned Mr Norman Fowler, the Social Services Secretary, and Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Health Minister, to do their stuff on the NHS. Next to nothing was reported, except in the *Guardian*, which had a story not calculated to best please Mrs Thatcher.

During the questioning she had been asked about raising prescription charges, whereupon she declared that no responsible government or politician would ever give any undertaking not to raise them. It was swiftly pointed out that she had done precisely that in the very same room in the 1979 campaign. For once the person in charge—and the person giving a news conference is always in charge—had failed to dodge an awkward question by simply rejecting its premise. The assumption is simple. The questioner, snubbed, will not come back for more. It usually works.

The news conference did, however, do somebody a bit of good. Mr Clarke is rather quicker on the uptake than Mr Fowler and managed to deliver an impressive and lengthy reply, at one point forestalling his master, which had the Prime Minister nodding with satisfaction.

He was clearly earning Brownie points, which will stand him in good stead when she comes to build her next government after the election. A ministry of his own seems on the cards. Mr Fowler, I suspect, will stay where he is.