Letter from Westminster

Show back on the road

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So the show is back on the road, and not, it has to be said, with much that is new on the bill. But it was probably a mistake to have expected that. The election was not about getting a mandate to do new things, but about getting one to carry on with what the government was doing already and, if possible, settle the hash of the Opposition at the same time. In some respects that was achieved, since Labour is going to get a new leader in due course and the Social Democrats already have one. There is also that 144 seat overall majority. But the election also lent the Alliance increased credibility. It may not have won the seats, but it certainly collected an impressive share of the votes.

The Queen's Speech at the opening of the new parliament had little to say about health beyond the statement: "Further action will be taken to ensure that patients receive the best value for the money spent on the National Health Service." It is hardly what might have been expected, given that the future of the NHS featured strongly during the election campaign with Mrs Thatcher repeatedly assuring the electorate that it was safe in her hands. That may very well be the case, but it was interesting that in spite of the emphasis placed on the problems and prospects of the NHS she went nowhere near it during the entire three weeks of visiting places relevant to her policies.

But the Queen's Speech always ends up with more than it promises being put before parliament—there is the standard caveat about "other measures will be laid before you." And a Miscellaneous Provisions Bill will appear from the Department of Health and Social Security in due course. It will, among other things, reinstate the lost sections of last session's Health and Social Security Bill giving family practitioner committees independent status.

Action on Acheson is also in the pipeline, but just when it will come is uncertain. What we can look forward to during the coming four years are more efforts aimed at increasing efficiency in the NHS, including increased contracting out of services like laundry, catering, and cleaning. A circular on the use of private contractors will be sent out this summer. On the management side, the report of the inquiry chaired by Mr Roy Griffiths, Sainsbury's deputy chairman, is due in the autumn and could lead to action to improve control of the way things are run. The watchwords will continue to be "value for money."

So far as the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill is concerned, the changes last session concerning medical records will stand, although we will have to wait until the autumn to see the new Bill. Mr Leon Brittan, the new Home Secretary, wants to take his time and familiarise himself with the problem before bringing the new Bill forward. If any reservations still exist about what was planned, now is the time to make representations.

Casualties at the DHSS

The election meant two casualties at the DHSS—both Mr Hugh Rossi and Mr Geoffrey Finsberg fell from grace in the

postelection reshuffle. It also proved fatal for another former DHSS minister, Dr Gerard Vaughan, who lost his consumer affairs job and also returned to the backbenches. Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, took the opportunity of the new appointments to reshuffle the DHSS portfolios. Dr Rhodes Boyson, the former headmaster, takes over as Minister for Social Security but gets no health duties. Mr Tony Newton, one of the parliamentary secretaries, takes over responsibility for the disabled from Mr Rossi. The other new minister is Mr John Patten, who becomes parliamentary secretary for health and will be particularly concerned with policy on personal social services, the elderly, preventive health care, and hospital specialist services.

Mr Kenneth Clarke, who could have expected promotion in the reshuffle, remains Minister for Health and will take a particular interest in NHS management and personnel and in the relation between the NHS and the private sector. It will be Mrs Thatcher's next reshuffle that will be crucial for him, since by then he could reasonably expect to be given a ministry of his own at last. There is a queue of junior ministers knocking at the Cabinet door, and he is up there at the head of it.

Mrs Dunwoody's ambitions and fears

Meanwhile, on the other side of the House, Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody has entered the lists for the deputy leadership of the Labour Party, but not, I suspect, with much hope of actually getting the job. She is the other half of Mr Peter Shore's ticket, since he is running for the leadership, again without much prospect of getting it. The result of the election did nothing to lessen her fears about what the government is up to over the NHS, and she told her local party at Crewe that the job of splitting Britain into the "haves" and the "have nots" was well under way so far as the NHS was concerned.

She said that for many of the elderly the plans to hive off great chunks of the NHS to private care could mean additional charges of £145 a week, and claimed that Mrs Thatcher's "presidential advisers" were already planning the next stage of their attack.

"They have adopted a step by step approach to killing the NHS," she said. "No single step is allowed to outrage the public too much, but the final intention is clear. We can be certain that these men are now considering methods of disenfranchising the rights of half the British people to free health care. Once the job of hiving off chunks of the NHS is complete they will start to talk of making the 'better off' pay extra for using the NHS. By better off they mean those on average wages. They may simply force those people to pay for NHS care and take out private health insurance. If the disgust that this would cause is seen as too damaging they may simply raise an additional charge for those on average earnings. By average they could mean as little as £130 a week."

It all sounds a bit like one of those admonitions about the end of the world being nigh, but Mrs Dunwoody is apt to sound like that. She rather gave the game away by adding that this public attack might not begin for many months. Perhaps somebody ought to remind her of the fate of the boy who cried "Wolf."