Letter from Westminster

"NHS belongs to the British people," says Kinnock

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Women scorned seem to be all the rage at the moment in British politics. There were the ladies in the Parkinson affair, the Prime Minister told by President Reagan that her advice on Grenada was not being taken, and now Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody deprived by Mr Neil Kinnock of her health job in the shadow Cabinet. Exit, therefore, Mrs Dunwoody from the health scene muttering that she will do she knows not what, but it will probably be terrible to behold. Mr Kinnock may not have made an enemy—one should not overdo these things—but he has ensured that Mrs Dunwoody will be a thorn in his flesh, for with nothing to lose she will not hesitate to voice her criticisms. Neil Kinnock cannot take her seats on Labour's national executive committee and the shadow Cabinet away from her, since she is elected to both. The point about shadow Cabinet jobs is that the parliamentary Labour Party decrees who shall sit on the body, the leader what jobs they shall do. Mrs Dunwoody has grounds for feeling aggrieved. While there are those who are critical of her performance, she can fairly argue that she stood for both the national executive committee and the shadow Cabinet on her record and was elected, and that her critics are no more vitriolic than those who do not think all that much of the record of the party's last education spokesman. She was offered other jobs, like overseas development, but turned them down for reasons that are obvious.

The new shadow health spokesman is Mr Michael Meacher, MP for Oldham West, known as the voice of Mr Tony Benn on earth. He was given the reunited health and social security portfolio. The reason for that owes more to political exigencies than to the advantages of bringing the two back together—they were separated by Mr Michael Foot. The fact is that the top places in the ballot for the 15 shadow Cabinet seats went to right wingers, and Mr Kinnock had to ensure that somebody from the left got a substantial job. Mrs Dunwoody proved the sacrificial victim. She does not, however, intend to abandon her interest in health matters and reckons that being without specific duties in the shadow Cabinet means that she can speak out as the mood takes her. And it will.

Mr Kinnock has shifted her deputy, Mr Terry Davis, MP for Birmingham, Hodge Hill, to the Treasury team and replaced him with Mr Frank Dobson, MP for Holborn and St Pancras, the man behind a series of discussion papers under the general heading of "NHS Unlimited." The Labour leader certainly sees health as an issue that he can exploit, and was present at the launch of the party's campaign to save the health service, when he was driven from party headquarters in an ambulance. This vehicle, an obsolete one, has been specially adapted and contains audiovisual equipment. It will travel round the country, the centrepiece of displays and protests against the cuts. There will be posters, stickers, and postcards that people can send to him endorsing the campaign. But Labour wants it to be more than just a party matter. Mr Kinnock said that it does not believe that it is enough to leave the fight to those in the party or those employed in the service. "The NHS belongs to the British people," he said. "It is to the people, therefore, that we are bringing

our message—that they must protest to protect their health service." As well as the fight in the country, it will continue at Westminster. But the aim, he said, was "to reach the parts that other parties cannot and will not reach."

Labour's charter for NHS

Mr Meacher said that the purpose of Labour's charter for the NHS, a new policy statement launched to coincide with the campaign, was to rouse the whole nation in defence of its most prized institution. "Even before the present cuts there has been no increase in resources over the last four years to the NHS, contrary to Tory claims, over and above what is necessary merely to meet the medical needs of elderly people and to keep up with the advance of medical technology," he said. "There will be real cuts this year, big cuts. The Tories originally claimed there was to be 1.2% growth this year. The Chancellor's cuts clawed this back to 0.2%. But that includes 'efficiency savings,' which is a straight euphemism for expenditure cuts. So the real change this year is a cutback of 0.3%."

Claiming that since the election the gloves had come off, Mr Meacher warned that the pace of attack on the NHS was "accelerating for the kill." Simply in terms of standing still the NHS would be about 2½% worse off. If the cuts were carried on for another year and thereafter, as the autumn statement due in a couple of weeks might well make clear, then the destruction of the NHS would inexorably gather pace.

"We shall in this campaign seek the support of the whole nation, irrespective of political views, for re-endorsing commitment to a health service free at the point of need, not only to protect the elderly, the chronically ill, and the poor, but because it is uniquely economic and efficient."

Mr Meacher wants to bring together all the doctors and consultants who go on television complaining about the cuts, although many of them probably vote Conservative. It might be an extra-parliamentary activity, but that was the arena in which the fight would be won. People had to be told what was being done to the NHS and the effect of the cuts on the primary care services. But the resistance must be within the law. He also wanted to see Tory MPs bombarded by their constituents.

"We are saying to the people who will listen to us," he continued, "that we are totally opposed to further cuts, which are destroying the basic fabric of the NHS as we know it. We want to see the steady expansion of the NHS, which will provide essential jobs for the front line care team and ensure the nation has the health service jobs it needs, and which it has always had in the last 30 years."

On Griffiths the Opposition was careful not to pledge outright opposition. It would, Mr Meacher said, depend on what the priorities of the managers were. Were they to make cuts or introduce greater efficiency? Nobody was opposed to the latter, but Labour was suspicious. The government had for years been tinkering with the idea of an alternative health care system, and the appointment of 192 managers looked as if the government was foisting a centralised cost cutting quango on the NHS, a service that Labour insisted was already efficient.