Letter from Westminster

No plans to alter NHS

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It is a rare event indeed when one Cabinet minister criticises another in public—what they do behind the others' backs is pretty much what one would expect. But there was Mr Norman Tebbit, flushed with delight at getting the trade and industry job, conceding to Mr Brian Walden on television that Mr Norman Fowler, the Social Services Secretary, had made a botch of presenting the government's case for its manpower targets for the National Health Service. He even allowed the suggestion that the presentation had been abysmal to pass, and said that there was "no doubt it could have been done better."

Now Mr Tebbit is a powerful man, who does not use words carelessly. He is also close to the Prime Minister, so it is probably a view she shares, though Mr Fowler did do quite a lot to redeem himself with an exceedingly good speech putting the government's case to the Conservative party conference in Blackpool. Standing ovations at Tory conferences are stage managed affairs, often to the second, but the ovation accorded Mr Fowler was as near to the real thing as the conference is ever likely to get.

His "mistake" was not to realise that once it became known that there were doctors' and nurses' jobs among the 4837 that are to go the public reaction would be hostile. Cutting administrative or ancillary jobs is one thing—nobody loves a bureaucrat—but reconciling claims that the cuts would not affect patient care with a reduction, no matter how small, in the number of those who do the caring is another.

His explanation was that, parliament being in recess, he did not have the right platform from which to present his case until the Tory conference provided one. It is true that a Fowler speech would not necessarily attract much notice and that statements do not, without the immediate response of a Commons audience, have the same impact, but there are ways of ensuring that what one has to say is taken note of—and he tried some of them, including the old trick of talking to a selected chum in a sympathetic newspaper. But they did not work. The conference speech—the one he should have made three weeks before, according to an admiring, but critical, Cabinet colleague—was properly forceful.

Labour provided the Commons platform this week for him to try to repeat the performance, by using one of the days on which it chooses the business to launch an attack on the government's handling of the NHS. The subject was seen as an ideal one for the new leader, Mr Neil Kinnock, to make his debate debut on. But more of that next week.

There was no doubt that the Tory rank and file in Blackpool were worried by what had been going on. Their dilemma was put succinctly by Mr David Hammond, a male nurse, who asked what he was going to tell the people he had assured on the doorsteps while

canvassing during the election that the NHS was safe in the government's hands now that directives had been issued to cut the increases in staff he had been boasting about. He got his answer—a firm commitment to the NHS—not just from Mr Fowler but from the Prime Minister when she spoke to the rally that closed the conference (22 October, p 1232). Mr Fowler declared his commitment to the health service to be absolute. "You can rely on me to fight for the interests of the NHS, but obviously within what the nation can afford."

It seems, therefore, clear enough. The government does not have plans to alter the NHS radically. Insurance based schemes of health care are out, and it remains a system financed from taxation. But that requires savings, and the villains of the piece are to be the bureaucrats. The report by Mr Roy Griffiths of the Sainsbury supermarket chain proposes the way forward and argues that the problem is one of too much administration, not enough management. Mr Fowler's problem is whether by making the NHS more efficient—and nobody denies that this is possible and desirable or that it will save money—he can make the savings required by Mr Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and make them quickly enough.

More central control

The way forward does look like requiring him to depart from the Conservative party's belief in less, not more, central government control. The need to save has forced the government to take greater powers to stop local authorities from overspending, and it looks as if the need to make the NHS more efficient will send the health ministers along in a similar direction.

How things might proceed was put to the conference and to a meeting of the Conservative Medical Society by Mr David Skidmore, a consultant, who said that the lessons of business had to be learnt. He wanted greater medical input at local level as nobody else knew the questions that had to be asked. Doctors had to face up to managing their own budgets, he said. He hoped the royal colleges would encourage consultants to go down that path, and that general practitioners would take a long hard look at the drugs they prescribed and the volume prescribed.

As to why he had to make the manpower cuts, Mr Fowler said that 18 months ago he had asked the health authorities to bring forward plans for control of their manpower, and when at last they did so he found that they had planned for an increase of 7000 jobs, mostly administrators and ancillary staff. So something had to be done, and it was ludicrous to charge that a reduction of 0.5% marked the end of the health service as we know it. What it meant was if the savings were made the authorities would have £40m for use elsewhere in the service. As for where the cuts should be made—in the administrative tail.

It is probably fair to say that round two went to Mr Fowler. But the fight is not over yet.