Letter from Westminster

Launching the great welfare debate

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Great public debates sometimes seem like the politician's last resort. Stuck for an answer? Call for a public debate. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr Nigel Lawson, has just issued such a call for a debate on the future of the welfare state during a television interview about his autumn economic statement. It was a quiet day, as Sundays sometimes are, and he attracted perhaps more attention than he would have done on a busy Thursday.

Anyway, a great debate was allegedly launched, and the question of what the state should pay for and what should be done by the private sector was raised yet again. The gist of Mr Lawson's argument was that the public spending plans for the next three years have been stabilised but the trend for increased spending is there beyond that and hard choices will have to be faced. It all sounded rather familiar—rather as if he were reviving the ideas floated by the government's think tank last year in its subsequently disowned leaked report. On the other hand, Mr Lawson is not alone in wanting a great debate. Other ministers of the wet persuasion have suggested it for their own ends. After all, the outcome is an open question and it could come down in their favour.

Scepticism about great debates is sometimes justified. Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, was said last week to have launched this one. He delivered a thoughtful speech to a conference on the social services organised by the *Financial Times* the day before Mr Lawson's autumn statement in the Commons. It was noted by the *Financial Times* but otherwise ignored. Mr Fowler is not one to waste his words. A copy of the thoughts of chairman Norman, as he is known by his chums at the DHSS, duly arrived on my desk, among others, with the hope that they would be duly disseminated for the greater good.

The substance of the speech was also resuscitated in a speech he made a few days later to a party meeting. But in between came the Chancellor's television appearance, and suddenly instead of being just another Fowler speech it became the opening salvo in the great debate.

The Secretary of State's point was that often in the past decisions have been taken in health and the social services in response to short term pressures or suddenly perceived needs and anomalies. The result was that ministers had inherited a haphazard and complex system that was expensive to administer and difficult to understand. The massive scale of activity at the DHSS—about a million people are employed in the hospital and community services alone—and the huge numbers affected had pressed on ministers the importance of appraising rationally the way in which things were done. He wanted, therefore, a responsible, realistic, and open debate, as well as an end to the leak, which, all too often, meant ministers retreating into their shells, not daring to think about the future.

Three principles

Mr Fowler was not, however, going to be deterred by the tactic of the leak and the scare, a reasonable determination one has to admit on the part of a one time journalist familiar with the technique. The problems of the future in social policy were too important. They should be discussed. "There is a clear responsibility for government

to look beyond the immediate future and reach judgments on what we can afford, or on what our children should be called on to pay for us," he said. "I would suggest our approach should be guided by at least three major principles. The first call on the social services must be those who have greatest need; the services must be efficiently managed and simple to administer; and there should be no attempt to duplicate or replace what can be better provided by the private or voluntary sector."

On efficient management, Mr Fowler said that when they looked at the handling of manpower, which accounted for around three quarters of the revenue costs of the hospital services, they had found a confused picture. Some health authorities had even been unable to say how many people were employed; that was why the improved systems of targets and control that had been the basis of the "modest adjustments" in manpower budgets had been introduced this year. The Griffiths report had followed on that, backed up the steps taken so far, and "pointed the way forward."

On the role of the private sector, Mr Fowler said he believed that there was room for more cooperation. A good example had been the installation by the British United Provident Association of a new lithotripter at St Thomas's Hospital for use by both private and NHS patients. But the NHS could also benefit from other kinds of involvement with the private sector, and he instanced the privatisation of catering, laundry, and cleaning services. "I believe we should retain that which is good and has stood the test of time," he concluded. "That is why we are committed to a strong NHS financed mainly from taxation."

Discrimination against disabled

A nice Commons row has broken out over the defeat last Friday in the Commons of the Bill introduced by Mr Bob Wareing, Labour MP for Liverpool West Derby, which would have banned discrimination against disabled people. The government insisted that this was not the way to achieve progress, and somehow or other enough Conservative MPs were present when the second reading took place to prevent it making progress, much to the fury of the Opposition, who thought that it should not have been talked out but should at least have been allowed to go into committee. In reality, the government only did what all governments do with backbenchers' Bills that they do not like—killed it.

Labour retaliated by refusing to agree to the formal business that was down to follow, and as a result the specialist select committees, including the Social Services Committee, were not set up. That will take a little time to achieve. Standing somewhere in the middle, Mr Michael Meadowcroft, the Liberal health spokesman, attacked both protagonists. He accused the government of being cowardly and cynical in what it did and said it would have been more honest to have defeated the Bill itself than talk it out. As for Labour, he said that their shouting and barracking had been at times so vicious and prolonged that it had made it impossible for any Tory dissidents to join them in the same division lobby. For once, I do not think it was a case of being holier than thou. A lot of disabled people had been brought along to listen to the debate by Labour, when it was no secret that the government was at the very least deeply unhappy about what was proposed and would almost certainly do what it did. Were people unfamiliar with parliamentary tactics being exploited for party ends?