Letter from Westminster

Glimpses into the future

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The reorganisation of the NHS presented the Opposition with something of a problem when it came to deciding how to react to Mr Patrick Jenkin's statement on his consultations about the proposals in *Patients First*. The difficulty is that Labour agrees that the NHS reorganisation carried out in 1974 by Sir Keith Joseph was a disaster and has to be changed. They even approve of the Government's plan to remove one of Sir Keith's three tiers. But if the end is acceptable, the means are not.

Mr Roland Moyle, the former Health Minister, told me that one of the major reasons for wanting a reorganisation was that it would improve the morale of NHS staff. That, however, was just what the Government was not doing. It was refusing to give the staff the protection they were asking for. "At the moment we are heading towards turmoil," he claimed. "It is a very great pity that they have missed the opportunity to democratise the NHS. They also keep talking about the large sums of money being made available for patient care as a result of reorganisation, whereas in fact not much is going to be released."

The Opposition is also critical of the Government's refusal to set up a staff commission to assist in the smooth transition for NHS staff from one job to another. So far as the Opposition is concerned, there is not much political capital to be made out of the changes to date. If, however, they do not work out as planned they will seize their chances with enthusiasm.

It looks as if a rousing, indeed angry, debate on the NHS is on the cards for this year's Labour Party conference to be held in Blackpool at the beginning of October.

The signs are all there in the resolutions published in the conference agenda. They show that feeling at the grassroots is running high, particularly over such issues as pay-beds and prescription charges. The resolutions actually go beyond present party policy and will, if approved, toughen it up considerably. Though Labour usually ends up debating a composite motion, it is based on the resolutions tabled in the agenda and the ingredients available are fairly potent.

On prescription charges, for instance, the recent "draft manifesto" issued by the National Executive Committee simply promised that charges would be abolished "progressively." The constituency parties, however, want immediate withdrawal and a return to a service "free at the point of use funded by taxation." The feeling on this issue is probably best summed up by the resolution submitted by Barking Constituency Labour Party, which complains that the latest increase will "cause the needy to resort to self-doctoring." Harlow CLP's resolution says that as a result of the increases "many will not be able to afford the medicine they need." On pay-beds the mood is the same. They want abolition forthwith. The party is committed to action, but it has still to be decided whether they will go for a quick chop, phase them out over a relatively short period without agreement, or seek agreement on a timetable with doctors.

The resolution from the Confederation of Health Service Employees is critical of the NEC for spending so much of its time on the squabble about the reforms to the party's constitution instead of getting on with a new plan for the NHS. COHSE says that "relatively little work" has been done and calls for

the establishment of a special party committee to produce a plan.

COHSE also wants the complete abolition of pay-beds, the phasing out of private medicine both inside and outside the NHS, and the repeal of what will shortly become the Health Services Act 1980. Their resolution also goes on to condemn the Government's "inequitable policies for remuneration of doctors as compared with nurses and other NHS staff."

The agenda includes several demands for the nationalisation of the drug industry, and BUPA comes under attack. Colchester CLP wants such private health insurance abolished and says that all their medical facilities and staff wishing to transfer should be incorporated in the NHS. The problems of the family doctor are raised by Ravensbourne CLP, which says that GPs are now facing an almost impossible battle to cope with the growing number of patients. Wellingborough CLP expresses extreme concern at the large difference in NHS provision for those in hospital and those nursed at home who are "entirely dependent on the judgment of individual GPs for their treatment," and calls for greater co-ordination so that the necessary integration of home and hospital care can be achieved.

The agenda would, of course, not be complete without a resolution from the Socialist Medical Association. They oblige with the familiar call to "take medical care out of the market place."

Looking ahead to the next session—Parliament goes into recess on 8 August—there is going to be another Health Services Bill, which will pick up the pieces left over from the present one. Mr Jenkin has also promised for the autumn a document setting out Government strategy and priorities for health which, he says, will deal with the balance between hospital and community care. It will apparently be "more qualitative than quantitative" compared to similar documents in the past, by which he means it will be shorter and better.

The Social Services Committee's next investigation is likely to be into medical education with special reference to the numbers of doctors and the career structure in hospitals, which ought to provide plenty of scope for a stimulating report. At the moment there are no signs that Sir George Young, Under Secretary for Health, is nearing agreement with the tobacco companies on a new code of practice for advertising. The talks are bogged down but not at a stalemate.

Some of the speculation that the days of the doctors' and dentists' review body are numbered seems a little premature. The chances are it will still be there when the time comes to make the recommendations next spring, but not quite the same importance will be given to them. One thing that seems possible is that the Government will forswear staging. The Treasury and Civil Services Committee has just come out with a report condemning such "dangerous devices." They are also opposed to delaying dates from which increases are to be paid because it raises the base for future pay negotiations.

The Budget may well propose higher excise duties, which should help in the fight against alcohol abuse and cigarette smoking. The failure to put them up as high as was expected led to considerable criticism of this year's Budget, and Mr John Biffen, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, speaking in the debate on the Finance Bill, indicated that the message had got home. "While I cannot speculate on the future pattern of taxation, I have noted that in many parts of the House there is a view that the taxable capacity of excise duty has not been exhausted," he said.