Letter from Westminster

An opportunity missed at Brighton

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Strange are the ways of Cabinet ministers. Mr Jenkin was faced with the chance to reply to the Conservative Party conference debate on health and social security, albeit to a motion lauding the valuable contribution made by the voluntary organisations towards the care of the sick, the disadvantaged, and the elderly. Against all advice the Social Services Secretary chose to speak about the voluntary services and nothing else. It seemed a rather odd decision considering that he has just put on the Statute Book an Act which allows a major reorganisation of the National Health Service. He could have spoken about what he liked, since Conservative conference motions are merely an expression of opinion—not, as at the Labour Conference, an instruction as to what must be Party policy. It was an opportunity missed.

At last year's conference Mr Jenkin was upstaged by his deputy, Dr Gerard Vaughan, the Health Minister, who scored a quite notable success with his speech. This year Dr Vaughan was not among the ministers chosen to reply to a debate—well, there was no debate on the NHS to reply to. A platform was, however, readily available. Dr Vaughan is one of the founders of the Conservative Medical Society and it invited him along one lunchtime to talk about the NHS. He attacked Labour's record as one of "drift and indecision" and claimed that he had inherited an appallingly chaotic situation. The nettle, however, had been grasped. It was his proud boast, and one we will hear repeatedly, that far from cutting NHS resources, this year the Government will be spending £200m more in real terms than Labour in their last year.

He also announced that the latest figures from the DHSS showed that there had been a marked fall in hospital waiting lists. By March 1980, he said, the numbers had been reduced by 92 000. That must be good news for the NHS. "I believe we are now well on the road to putting the NHS back on its feet," he added. "The policy of small hospitals is going very well indeed. Now we must turn to directing resources towards prevention and the community services." One area in which he is planning action is on the general practitioner services. "We do not make the best use of our GP skills," he said. "I am asking the Royal College of General Practitioners to come to me now with advice about the kind of GP service they would like to see, about ways of extending the range of initiatives so that GPs can have the freedom to exercise their skills."

He criticised the way some doctors interpret clinical freedom and said it was one of the great dilemmas in the NHS. "Is it right to give total clinical freedom to override other circumstances so that a doctor on a particular whim can spend huge sums of money when his colleagues do not agree with him?" he asked. Then he answered the question. He was all for clinical

freedom but it had to be realistic and not at the expense of everybody else in the NHS. His message to doctors who favour rare and expensive drugs as a matter of course, drugs their colleagues might use only occasionally, was to turn to other sources for the cash. "Use your own charisma to raise the extra funds," he advised.

Warning against jobs for the boys

Dr Vaughan's message for the hospital administrators and others faced with next year's reorganisation was blunt. It must not turn out to be a case of simply rearranging the jobs for the boys. There were already some serious signs in parts of the country that this was likely to happen. He urged the members of the society to let him know about any instances that came to their attention. He promised that the Government would go ahead quickly with setting up the new district health authorities. Each would have separate budgets for management and the service so it would be possible for the first time to know whether money was being spent extravagantly on administration. "We have the power to limit specifically administrative costs under the Health Services Act for the first time—and we shall use it," he warned. "We are going to get nowhere in the NHS until we have proper departmental accounting. I see proper unit budgeting as the first step in a change of the financing of the NHS." His verdict on the NHS? The patient is on the mend, recovering, and the prognosis is good. Morale is going up all over the place.

In the conference debate Dr David Tod of the Conservative Medical Society said that voluntary organisations could only provide the icing on the cake, just as the private sector could only provide a few cherries, and he called for more money for the NHS. There were still too many old hospitals, he said. Waiting lists, falling though they might be, were still too high and prescription costs were still not under control. He urged the Government to give the new district health authorities teeth, and warned against the "jealous eagles" in the NHS who guard their empires. The reorganisation would be a great improvement, but more had to be done.

There were a few emotional minutes when the conference heard from Mr Andrew Patterson, Britain's youngest heart transplant patient, and the first Conservative agent to speak to the conference. It was a considerable effort, given that his operation was only on 4 June.

I cannot say that this year Dr Vaughan upstaged his boss—60 or so people at a lunchtime meeting does not achieve that—but the conference did not provide Mr Jenkin with his finest hour. He received what one newspaper called "a quiet reception" for his lengthy praise of volunteers and suffered the humiliation of being introduced as Mr Peter Jenkin by the acting chairman. It could have been worse. He might have been announced as Roy.