LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

A lesson in realpolitik

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One clear lesson stands out from three months of political turmoil over the health service. It is that many people who should know better are still incapable of comprehending what motivates the present government. Most interpreters of public affairs seem to have learnt little in nine years of reading the mind of the Thatcher administrations. It certainly cannot be perceived by reference to what other governments in other times might have done.

Soft options are not on offer, especially in matters of public spending; nor is the government easily swayed by protest strikes, demonstrations, moral blackmail, or the usual forms of public pressure. In that respect the health service can expect to fare no better than the school teachers, the miners, or any other group that has misread this government's strength of purpose. The only surprise is that so many are still surprised by its repeated displays of political nerve.

If there is to be a change of attitude it will come at a time of Mrs Thatcher's own choosing, as recent events have shown. Public outcry has certainly been sustained, but to what real effect? It culminated in the House of Commons debate on 19 January. That produced a government majority of 105 votes applauding the achievements of the health service and the substantial extra funds injected by the taxpayer and urging more effective use of NHS resources.

Some gullible commentators thought that they detected a wobble by John Moore, the still not fully fit Social Services Secretary, but it was more imagined than real. He duly propped himself up at the dispatch box and read Mrs Thatcher's lines—which, of course, had nothing to say about either fresh funding or the possibility of a fundamental review of the NHS. The government has thus withstood a fairly intense political barrage against its health policies. It is far from over, and though it may have survived a battle, the Cabinet now knows that it has a war on its hands.

For the moment, however, it is the Prime Minister's critics who lack a clear strategy. For instance, when it comes to underestimating the government's tenacity even the presidents of three of the medical royal colleges were notable victims. They came away from a meeting with Mr Moore on 13 January believing him to be sympathetic to their twin request for more funding for the NHS and an inquiry into its difficulties. Old hands in the Thatcher watching business were less impressed and therefore not at all surprised to hear that the Prime Minister—to quote one of her colleagues—“blew her top” at the reported suggestion of new cash. The Treasury promptly intervened to deny it.

So it was more in sorrow than in anger that the presidents learnt the lesson, as they later confessed at a hearing of the Commons social services select committee. As the Royal College of Physicians' president, Sir Raymond Hoffenberg, put it: “It is no secret that we came out of our meeting with the Secretary of State feeling somewhat optimistic. He had listened to us sympathetically. Since then we have read nothing but disconcerting news that has caused us considerable dismay. The response has been very disappointing.”

Perhaps the presidents' foray into politics did take them out of their depths and into waters that they admitted were best left to the seasoned warriors of the BMA. Their innocence extended also to a refreshing disdain for statistics—such as putting a figure on how

much more money the NHS needs. It is a disarming approach, but one which Tory MPs on the committee felt betrayed the profession's reluctance to take “hard decisions.”

Surely, thundered Mr Nicholas Winterton, the colleges should have some idea of the money required. After all, they were a vital part of the health service and had seen fit to issue a critical statement. Mr Ian Todd, president of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, did not agree. Doctors were not economists. That was something for management.

Running a hospital is not a sausage machine

But what about disparities in the use of surgical beds, which Mr Tim Yeo said might vary by a factor of 15 in the length of time for similar treatments? This is to be a main thrust of the government's next efficiency drive, which the presidents clearly think is misdirected; as Mr Todd pointed out: “I don't believe you have any idea what the problems are. You cannot run a hospital like a sausage machine. It is not a simple matter.”

The presidents faced hard questioning, too, about consultants who do not honour their contracts, though they disputed a figure of 10-15% who are not pulling their weight. And they offered their colleges' help to narrow the “resources gap” by formulating a system of priorities for clinical treatment, on the assumption that the NHS could never meet all expectations.

But, having failed with Mr Moore, the presidents continued to press their case for a “grass roots commission” to go and see what was actually happening in the hospitals. As Mr Todd explained: “One gets the impression that people do not believe what is going on.” To which Sir Raymond added that it was like applying “Elastoplast to erupting sores until the whole body was covered in plasters.”

It was the position in the hospitals that provoked their celebrated declaration to the effect that the acute services were almost at breaking point through lack of resources—a statement that did more than anything to alert the public. But, they were asked, was that not just the action of an upmarket trade union representing producer interests in the health service?

“Not at all,” retorted Sir Raymond. “We are not looking for money for ourselves at all. We are looking for money for patients. That is our concern. We have no other motive at all.”

The presidents were the first witnesses to appear before the reconstituted select committee under its new chairman, Labour MP Mr Frank Field. The committee is setting out to become the focus of a complete reappraisal of resources in the health service. Its immediate remit is to report on underfunding as it exists now and how to achieve a breathing space. It will then go on to a longer term inquiry into alternative methods of funding—with nothing ruled out, including insurance and lotteries.

Attention will shift increasingly to the budget, now only six weeks away. In this context notice should be taken of another meeting last week. It was between the Chancellor of the Exchequer and leaders of the right wing 92 Group of Tory MPs, who are about 100 strong. They urged him not to equate a 2p cut in income tax with more funding for the NHS, as he is being pressed to do. Any extra money for the health service would have to buy something in return, by way of increased productivity, they said.