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Editor's choice

Getting a prime minister to turn: roast slowly and then turn up the heat suddenly

Earlier this week the British prime minister, Tony Blair, pledged on live television that he would increase expenditure on the NHS from the present 6.8% of gross national product to the European average of 8% (p 205). That would mean another \$9bn a year for the service, an increase of about 17.5%. Why did he do this? Was he suddenly convinced by the arguments that the BMA and other health organisations have been advancing for 20 years? Of course not. He did it because his spin doctors—those Svengalis who are increasingly resented—lost control.

In politics, as in comedy, timing is everything. As recently as three years ago some politicians could talk about the NHS as the finest health service in the world. Then came the disclosure of babies dying after heart surgery in Bristol and a series of high profile scandals. A new government was elected, promising not only modernisation of the NHS (who can be against modernisation?) but also tight control of public finances. Fortunately for the government the economy has gone well, but unfortunately for it public confidence in the NHS—or at least the media's confidence—has begun to drain away. Britain has the worst results in Europe in cancer and heart disease. The NHS, perhaps the greatest achievement of Old Labour, had begun to be the major problem of New Labour.

Then came this year's winter crisis, together—perhaps, perhaps not—with a flu epidemic. The biggest story in the British media was the failure of the NHS to cope (p 258). There were no intensive care beds available. Routine operations were cancelled: some patients reportedly went from having operable to inoperable cancer. All of this may not have been much more of a crisis than in several previous years, but it followed an autumn of discontent. The media started a feeding frenzy, perhaps fuelled by a shortage of other stories. (The second story of the week was disorganisation at the Millennium Dome, a non-story.)

The Svengalis might have deflected all this, but then came an intervention by Lord (Robert) Winston—not only Britain's best known doctor though his television work but also a doctor greatly respected by other doctors and a Labour peer (p 205). His elderly mother had been failed by the NHS. The government had lied. More money for the NHS was essential. The Svengalis leapt on him, and he went to ground after retracting some of his statements. But it was too late. The prime minister had to interrupt his weekend and promise more money.

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