Letter from Westminster

Political parties fight to champion NHS

WILLIAM RUSSELL

Almost the first action that Mr Neil Kinnock took on becoming Labour leader was to write to the Prime Minister demanding a debate on the National Health Service. Mrs Thatcher has snubbed him, however, and thus prevented him from using the NHS as a platform for his first appearance heading a debate as Opposition leader. There are, of course, other methods that he can use, such as forcing an emergency debate on the subject.

Neither Mrs Thatcher nor Mr Norman Fowler, the Social Services Secretary, would flinch from such a debate. They used the Conservative conference in Blackpool to launch their counterattack. Mrs Thatcher is known to be upset by the government's failure to carry the argument, and by the failure of the health ministers in particular to get the government's case over. That case was spelt out early in the week by Mr John Patten, the junior health minister, standing in for Mr Kenneth Clarke at a meeting of the Conservative Medical Society. He was left in no doubt by his audience that they believed that the case had been badly put.

Mr Patten claimed that a lot of people in the medical and nursing professions have been crying wolf and will find out how wrong they have been. He said that all that the government was doing was carrying on with the "quiet revolution" on which it had embarked two years ago to make the NHS efficient. The government considers that the service has been carelessly managed for decades and that there must, therefore, be room for economies. It points out that the NHS has a staff of over 850 000 and an annual budget of £15 000m. If savings cannot be made in an organisation of that size then this is indeed a crazy world. The cuts that Mr Fowler had achieved were minute when placed in context.

But if its case is sound Mr Patten conceded that it has not been put effectively enough. Part of the problem is that whatever reservations people have about the NHS they do not see it as a potential victim for cuts, and when the impression is given that doctors and nurses are being cut the arguments about patient care not being affected are not believed. Mr Patten, however, reckons that in a couple of years people will wonder what all the fuss was about and say then that what ministers did to improve NHS efficiency was a good thing.

When Mr Fowler took to the rostrum of the Conservative party's conference he reiterated the government's commitment to defend the service but he insisted that more should be saved, particularly among the administration. There was, he said, too much administration and too little management. He certainly seemed to have no difficulty in getting the message across to his audience that to suggest that trying to save 0.5% was tantamount to dismantling the NHS was nonsense. The conference gave him a standing ovation anyway.

Labour capitalised to great effect on the future of the NHS during the election campaign—it was the one issue it got right—and subsequent actions by ministers, including Mr Nigel Lawson's cuts immediately after the election, have lent credibility to the claim that a secret Tory manifesto existed. It is, therefore, perhaps as well to

repeat just what Mrs Thatcher did pledge, since this is going to be a running battle. Speaking in Edinburgh as the election reached its climax, she repeated the 1979 promise about the NHS being safe in Tory hands and went on: "I have no more intention of dismantling the NHS than I have of dismantling Britain's defences, and if you look at our public expenditure plans for the next three years it is there in black and white. These are the figures—£700m more for the NHS this year, another £800m next year, and another £700m the year after that. Labour know these facts. They are in the book." She was, of course, referring to the public expenditure white paper published earlier this year. The Prime Minister repeated these figures to the Blackpool conference during a trenchant defence of her party's commitment to the NHS (p 1232).

The row over Mr Fowler's package of manpower cuts broke too late for the Liberals at their assembly in Harrogate to make much political capital of it but not too late for Dr David Owen, leader of the Social Democrats, to do so. Speaking on the final day of the assembly, he put in the Alliance's bid to be the defender of the NHS. It is a role that Labour believes belongs to it—the name of Aneurin Bevan has not been so often cited in decades. Dr Owen, as a doctor and a former health minister, clearly reckons that he is better suited for the role. "I did not come into politics, I did not leave medicine, to watch the disintegration and desecration of the NHS," he said. The message that the Alliance had to get across was that under them not only would the NHS be rescued but it would be built on, maintained, and strengthened.

Three distinct futures for NHS

What is clear is that there are three distinct futures on offer for the NHS. Labour made what it had in mind quite clear when the conference passed by an overwhelming majority a resolution moved by NUPE pledging the nationalisation of all health care facilities, including the drug companies, within the first three years of taking office. In addition to dismantling the private sector, Labour promised the abolition of prescription charges and pledged the party to fight the government's privatisation plans. Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, shadow health spokesman for the moment—she faces the shadow Cabinet elections in the next week and after that it is for Mr Kinnock to allocate the jobs—promised that Labour would lead the campaign to save the NHS. Whether she will remain health spokesman is anybody's guess. But she is Labour's token woman—Miss Joan Lester, who is held in high regard by Mr Kinnock, is out of the Commons for the moment—so that may help. As usual Mrs Dunwoody was not pulling her punches, accusing the Tories of not seeing the NHS as something that protected people but as a big golden goose ripe for asset stripping.

The government's plans, as popularly perceived, have succeeded in uniting the normally non-militant groups like nurses and doctors with the health service unions in opposition. The task for the government is to split that alliance. As for Labour and the Alliance, they will be striving to become the real defender of the NHS.