

The parliamentary scene

Strikes by NHS workers

The second day of the Parliamentary debate on the Queen's Speech last November was spent examining the current problems of the National Health Service. Ever the optimist, the Secretary of State for Social Services, Mr David Ennals, said he hoped that the difficulties the Service faced over pay could be resolved without industrial action; and he brought out the usual tired phrases deploring any action that 'puts patients at risk'.

Since then the NHS has been through a winter of unprecedented strikes organised by the major unions representing cleaners, porters, some nurses, laundry workers, and ambulance men. Essential supplies have been turned away by pickets acting for striking lorry drivers. One consultant surgeon achieved nationwide publicity by refusing to see any patient who was a union member; but in general the reaction of both administrators and politicians has been resigned and even complacent.

Two months after telling Parliament that he intended to explore ways of avoiding industrial action, Mr Ennals had to confess late in January that there had been widespread disruption and that there was more ahead.

The anger and despair that had led to the strike action is easily explained. The ambulancemen, for example, had been trying to get negotiations on their grievance (over pay bonuses said to be anomalous) for over four years. Porters, cleaners, and many other manual workers in the NHS are among the lowest-paid groups in Britain. There is, however, a second factor that helps explain why so many hospital staff have become so militant in the past few months. They have learnt that striking is the only way that they can be certain of gaining the attention of the politicians who have the power to make pay settlements. Nurses' leaders were quick to point out that they, too, had longstanding grievances: but whereas the striking ambulancemen were seen by the Prime Minister and by Mr Ennals, the non-striking nurses were refused when they asked for a similar audience. Experts on industrial relations such as Dr Roger Dyson are now saying that the outlook cannot improve so long as the

NHS continues to settle its strikes in ways that are immediately favourable to the striking staff. This is true not only of strikes about pay but also of those such as the action at Normansfield Hospital that led to the area health authority agreeing to suspend the consultant-in-charge, Dr Terence Lawlor. When Mr Ennals made a statement to Parliament about the inquiry into the Normansfield incident he agreed that 'when a conflict arises between the rights of the patients not to be endangered by industrial action on the one hand and the rights of staff to take industrial action on the other the rights of the patients should prevail.' Yet, in practice, this sort of ethical or moral principle has collapsed under two pressures: firstly, industrial action is seen by many NHS workers as the only way to make their voices heard; and, secondly, the continual submission to strikers' demands has shown them that the method is effective.

Is there any way out? One idea being canvassed at present by several groups (including young hospital doctors) is that NHS workers, police, and firemen - all of whom put lives at risk if they go on strike - should make special agreements with the state. In exchange for an undertaking not to go on strike the groups concerned would have their pay (and presumably their grievances) settled by an independent body whose decisions would be binding on both parties. Ambulance drivers believe that they have as good a claim on this special status as, say, firemen. Some progress has been made in the desired direction by the setting up of the Clegg inquiry into comparability—but that is a long way removed from the doctors' and dentists' Review Body. Furthermore successive Governments have always refused to commit themselves to accept the decisions of a body of that kind, claiming that to do so would be to restrict the sovereignty of Parliament. In practice, too, Governments have more than once refused to accept pay awards recommended by the Review Body. Unless a way can be found around that impasse, or administrators take a far tougher line with striking staff, there seems little prospect of industrial peace for the NHS.

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