

MR WICKS

PRIME MINISTERNHS - PRESENTATION

It is clear that the Opposition, in concert with the Daily Mirror, intend to exploit every sob story that emerges from the NHS. This subject is a useful - and emotive - means of diverting attention away from their lack of policy.

At the same time the Opposition, perhaps with some Conservative sympathy, will attack the Government for introducing dental and optical testing charges as part of a wider assault on the Government's "meanness" over the NHS.

There is nothing new in this tactic. The Opposition has for years been trying to undermine the Government in the eyes of the electorate by portraying it as "uncaring", with little effect.

The Government should however take more seriously:

- an Opposition attack based on a combination of hard cases, a more rigorous approach by the Government to NHS financing and nurses' eligibility for the community charge
- the willingness of hospitals to lend themselves to publicity exercises designed either directly or indirectly to secure more resources for the NHS
- the certainty that, in the very nature of things, there will be an endless supply of sob stories to keep the campaign going
- the desperate need by the Opposition, for an issue on which it can unite.

In these circumstances you may feel that special attention should be given to the presentation of health matters and the organisation of a counter attack.

There are two essential elements to this:

- i. the presentation of Government policy and the facts on such things as:
 - the overall performance on the NHS - increase in resources; staffing; throughput
 - improvement of nurses' position
 - the phenomenal success of the NHS so far in coping with medical and technical advance and the increasing age of the population.

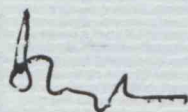
- ii. the vigorous and swift response to local sob stories which puts the facts on record and in a proper context.

The effectiveness of any counter attack requires both elements. It is relatively easy to mount a campaign to put over the Government's overall performance. We have not so far demonstrated our ability to mount a rapid response to the emotive use of individual cases.

I believe we need a small campaign group involving No 10, DHSS, COI, Chief Whip's Office and Stephen Sherbourne/Christine Wall with the objectives of:

- i. organising briefing at both national and hospital level and ensuring speed of response to hard cases which attract national publicity;
- ii. planning a nation-wide campaign to put over the facts;
- iii. organising a group of Backbenchers on a regional basis through the DHSS/Chief Whip's Office with responsibility for carrying the fight to the media.

You may care to discuss.



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