

Working For Patients

How many people will accept the logic of Chris Hani's argument (*MT* March) that, because there is little evidence in the NHS white paper of a privatisation threat, 'claims that the white paper signals the start of a privatisation strategy are exaggerated'?

Not those inside the DHSS who leaked the highly-damaging late draft to Robin Cook MP, for they have an inkling of a strategy to displace the NHS that bears fruit in the fifth term. Nor is the Tory Right likely to agree, for the white paper contains more elements from the 'No Turning Back' group's manifesto on the NHS than was expected from dampish Health Secretary Kenneth Clarke.

Working For Patients is a visionary plan designed to recapture the political initiative around health for the Conservatives, and is full of woolly thinking and unsubstantiated assertions of unconventional wisdom. Would anyone expect the Conservatives to announce their intentions clearly in such a document?

The key themes seem plain enough. The use of incentives to doctors to make services more responsive to patients is accepted by Chris Ham as a good thing, without any justification of such a demand-led approach, or evidence that financial incentives are the best

Breaking Out Of The Impasse

The case for an electoral pact was argued convincingly by Davis and Green (*MT* February). What is surprising is not the public's support for Thatcherism, but the Labour leadership's inability to face the facts. In spite of unpopular policies, like depriving the health service of adequate funds, the opinion polls show that the Conservatives are consistently 10 points ahead of Labour.

Faced with this message the Labour front bench has settled for a policy of carrying on as before in the hope that things will improve. They are merely following events, rather than taking the initiative and trying to control the situation.

There are two straightforward ways of breaking out of this impasse, and both require a decisive act of political will.

answer to whatever impairs service delivery, or philosophical justification that medical care is a commodity suitable for market management. Competition between providers is similarly over-valued as a stimulant to greater efficiency in resource use, again without supportive evidence.

There are positive and intriguing features of the white paper that a progressive government might use, particularly tighter controls over consultants' job descriptions and GPs' prescribing, and possibly in plans for GP budget-holding; but these details hardly offset the context.

For those for whom the NHS is simply a service free at the time of need, and 'mainly' (Kenneth Clarke's qualification) financed from general taxation, the white paper is no threat, at least for the moment and possibly for the next 10 years. But if issues of equity, of prevention, of meeting needs and of empowerment are part of our understanding of the NHS, then much may be lost from the pressure for variation in service quality, and for greater commercial involvement in medical care, built into *Working For Patients*. We might think how its implications, once made public, could reduce the Tory majority in the fourth term and prevent a fifth. •

Steve Iliffe, London

Firstly, they could utilise the next Tory outrage, namely the poll tax, and react positively. If the opinion polls show no significant shift in Labour's favour three months after those extortions have hit the purse of every adult, then they must make an electoral pact of some kind.

Secondly, they could adopt a simpler form of the above method, and say that if the polls do not show a significant improvement after a certain date, then they will need to negotiate a pact with the other opposition parties. It doesn't matter what date is chosen. The mere fact of determining any date will mean that they have decided to stop following the situation and have chosen instead to influence the course of events. Drifting, in the hope of better times round the corner, will get them nowhere.

Michael M Winter, London

Healthy And Wealthy

While I agree (*MT* March) that the government's white paper *Working For Patients* is imaginative and stimulating, and should not be dismissed out of hand; we must not forget where it's coming from.

Last year the government produced its think-tank paper: *Britain's Biggest Enterprise - ideas for radical reform of the NHS*. It was plain that financing health care from the public purse is *not* sacrosanct. Budget-holding practices contracting services from independent hospital trusts seems to me to pave the way for US-style 'health maintenance organisa-

Private Set-up

Chris Ham's article (*MT* March) is naive. There are no privatisation proposals in the NHS white paper because the organisational systems necessary to administer private medicine do not exist. The establishment of independent hospitals and GP practices

Pact Problems

Even if Davis and Green (*MT* February) are right that Labour cannot win an overall majority next time, a Labour-Democrat pact will not improve the chances of defeating Thatcher.

In the abstract, a pact giving the Democrats a clear run in the South against Tories might give the Democrats 20-30 extra seats, although I see no way it could benefit Labour elsewhere since Democrat voters will, other things being equal, split evenly between Labour and Tory candidates if Democrat candidates stand aside. But elections are not fought in a psephological vacuum. The conclusion of a Labour-Democrat pact is likely to have a number of nasty political consequences.

First, Tory propaganda that votes for Democrats equal votes for Labour will be confirmed and will persuade many right-leaning Democrat voters to vote Tory.

Second, it is fanciful to imagine that Constituency Labour Parties will be eager to stand aside, often for much-hated Democrats. Many local Labour Parties would have to be shut down. Such internecine strife would present a disastrous political spectacle. We would probably end up with many independent labour candidates as well.

Third, as Davis and Green

tions' (HMOs) which do just this. Health centres have their own budgets, contract with clients to provide services, and have an incentive to keep their patients/clients healthy. If their patient/client has to be hospitalised the HMO contracts with the 'best buy' hospital for that service.

It sounds very familiar, the more so on reading the working party papers, just out. Of course, there is one difference. In the US, HMO clients pay an annual sum, either individually or through insurance, for their health maintenance and care. Is Chris Ham so sure we are not going down this road?

Katy Gardiner, Liverpool

negotiating payment for services will establish such systems. In the next two to three years the necessary management and financial, and hence charging, systems are being implemented. After the next election health care can be privatised. 0

Judy Cox, Gwent

acknowledge, it is unlikely that the SDP could cohabit the same pact with Labour. SDP candidates would split the anti-Thatcher vote with renewed vigour, especially as they would be handed a new identity as the centre party untainted by deals with Labour.

The combined effect of these factors will be to impede any battle to unseat the Conservatives. The sort of 'let's all get together and things will be fine' thinking behind the Davis and Green analysis is all too reminiscent of the botched Liberal-SDP merger that was really a split. Labour has enough splits already without being given the kiss of death by Paddy Ashdown.

Davis and Green say that a majority Labour win cannot happen. But politics is a strange business that has often confounded over-speculative analysts of voting behaviour. Unforeseen storms often blow finely-balanced theories to the ground like playing card houses. Theories may say how Thatcherism is in the ascendant, but political instincts tell me that after poll-tax blues and a possible economic downturn Thatcherite ideology will not look so convincing.

I'm working for a Labour victory, and no pacts. •

Dave Take, Birmingham

Electoral Suicide

Much as I found the article on electoral pacts (*MT* Feb) interesting, there was nothing particularly new or revolutionary suggested. In the 'accepted' pacts of standing down at key seats, the only result I can see is electoral suicide and the continuation of Thatcherism.

There is, though, another pact: for constitutional reform. The pact which I suggest for the opposition would involve no political agreements, only the call for the immediate dissolution of parliament after victory, with a following general election under proportional representation.

What has the opposition to lose from this 'pact for democracy'? There is virtually no way that such a pact could fail to win, as the following elections would

decide who was to rule. It would unite all except the few Tories scared of not being re-elected under PR. Without PR it will be a long time before we see the back of Thatcher. We must not let her further undermine civil liberties and destroy what remains of socialism.

If the opposition won with such a pact there is no way a minority government like Thatcher's could have such reactionary policies. Even if the electorate voted as in 1987 in the first PR election, the most radical Thatcher proposals would easily be defeated. With the wave of optimism and the desire for further change which would be created. I would be quietly confident that a socialist government would be elected at long last. O

C Saunders, Southport

Epistemological Anarchy

Contrary to Andrew Coates (Letters, *MT* Feb), I am not so dismissive of the debates about postmodernism. It is not only an affair between tiny numbers of French intellectuals; witness the British work being done by Laclau and Mouffe, Gavin Kitching, Barry Hindess etc, and the American contributions of Michael Ryan, Stanley Aronowitz and Gayatri Spivak.

Anybody who takes Roy Bhaskar seriously is deserving of pity: his book *Scientific Realism And Human Emancipation* might as well have been written in Hegel's day. What it calls 'science' is nothing more or less than a metaphysical attempt to shore-up a very Western and rationalist concept of science which is a cultural inheritance from ancient Greece.

Coates' criticisms of Kuhn

and Feyerabend are easily dealt with. Coates accuses them of being 'arbitrary': well, the answer to this is a proud 'Guilty!' It is only by recognising that our point of departure is one point among many that we can come to a completely anti-essentialist understanding of the world.

This is what poststructuralism means when it states that all metaphysical ideologies (orthodox marxism included) 'forget' the articulation of differences at the point of departure and convert them into an all-encompassing origin, which bears the seed of all future development. This is why we should support Feyerabend's 'epistemological anarchism' as the latest phase in the project of extracting basically bourgeois forms from the body of left-wing thought. •

Brian Precious, Lancashire

Raymond Williams

The widely-lamented death last year of Raymond Williams has meant the loss of Britain's foremost contemporary socialist thinker. A trust is being set up, with the status of a legal charity, in order to fund a series of annual memorial lectures. These lectures would discuss and develop the continuing relevance of Williams' extraordinarily wide-ranging work to future cultural and political practice. They would be delivered in central London and the texts would be published.

We hope that many readers of *Marxism Today* will sympathise

with this plan and contribute generously to its realisation. Cheques should be made out to 'Raymond Williams Memorial Trust' and sent to me at the Department of Literature, Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA.

Graham Martin, Milton Keynes

Editorial Note: We welcome your letters to add to discussion. Please send them to *MT* Letters Page, 16 St John Street, London EC1M 4AY. Brevity means you are more likely to be published. We reserve the right to cut.

Serious Science

Is it really necessary for *MT* to demonstrate its editors' defensive ignorance of matters scientific by indexing a perfectly reasonable news item under the head 'Science Gets Sexy' (Contents *MT* March)? Those seriously concerned with issues such as the use and abuse of scientific and technological discovery, and the irresponsible political control of science, despair at such trivialisation. The heading is not even remotely related to the content. Good tabloid stuff.

The item itself gets it about right, in noting that industrialists' new-found motivation to 'promote careers in science, even for women' is 'the spectre of a severe shortage of trained technical staff by the end of the next decade'. Good technical staff are always in short supply, and what better for industry's needs than a docile band of careful and responsible women service workers? Hence government enthusiasm for schemes such as the EOC's WISE (Women Into Science & Engineering) campaign.

When it comes to the 'decision-taking professional-level' jobs and research posts in science and engineering, where competition for places in the sun gets fiercer daily, the picture is rather different. We have now to

have our token senior women. That is inevitable at the current state of the tide. However, there is abundant historical evidence for the elimination of women in science from their positions in times of recession or cutback in public funding for research. The present situation is no different. At the same time it is apparent that, as in the past, women workers are often to be found in the newest fields. Women are quicker, it seems, to recognise potential openings and less constrained by loss of an established position.

You report the Festival's concern with promoting 'scientific literacy' and 'public understanding of science'. A real presence of women in the scientific workforce can only further discussion in the community at large of the promise or problems associated with new developments in science, a Festival objective.

It is important that the Festival does not in future years, as you envisage, degenerate into a mere technocratic event or PR exercise, trade-financed and sales-motivated. There are quite enough of these already. To ensure that this does not happen, Edinburgh's Science Festival in April should get the serious coverage that it merits.

Sam Stone, Edinburgh



Apology: Last month (*MT* March) we managed to print a photograph on page eight which was *not* Ricardo Lagos, the prominent Chilean socialist leader.

We apologise for the mix-up, and print here the photograph which should have accompanied Benny Pollack's interview.*

