



# Clarke's Unhealthy Obsession

The ambulance dispute has severely tested Kenneth Clarke. **Sarah Benton** looks at the health secretary's predicament, while *Jim Bewsher* reflects on some future lessons for the unions

It's a lucky politician who can choose the ground on which to fight out an issue of principle, and Kenneth Clarke is not that politician. Indeed, he appears to regard the ambulance dispute, now soaking up so much of his time and the public's money, as damn bad luck. Last summer, he has said, Roger Poole himself was convinced the ballot of ambulance workers would vote to accept the 6.5% on offer. But the railway strike was on, and by unlucky coincidence, 'just as the ballot papers were in the men's hands, the railway management conceded an increase of 8.8%'.

This sense of betrayal by fate has changed Mr Clarke. Once popular for his insouciant good cheer, he has become suspicious and jumpy, quick to give and take offence. He contradicts himself, floats proposals (there will be more money, he wants a two-tier ambulance service) and then denies them. His good-humoured comments in parliament have become acerbic, often rude, and deeply personal.

He himself appears to feel deeply aggrieved. He was, he suggests, ignored by his cabinet colleagues when he warned during the summer that if the railway workers' strike succeeded, the government was in for an inflationary round of pay increases in the public sector. Now he is shunned as a bearer of failure by his party. For a man who likes to be liked and to feel on top of things, it is very hard to bear.

So why does he stick 'doggedly' (his own word) to his position? In part because he feeds off myths like these. In part it is his pride and the seeming impossibility of backing down now. But above all he is driven by his determination to be the one secretary of state for health who reforms the NHS. All the other ministers - and they have been among the best and brightest Mrs Thatcher has to hand - have been broken by the NHS.

In the world of Kenneth Clarke's imagination, conceding a pay increase to the ambulance workers would mean a failure to be the reforming secretary of state. Because Mr Clarke's hope to be the great reformer of the future is stymied by his fixation on the 1970s. Many of this generation of Tories are mesmerised by that decade, believing that it epitomised all that was wrong with Britain and thereby catapulted them into their decade of rule. A successful Conservative minister must, above all, learn the lessons of the 1970s.

Writing for the *Sunday Express* on November 12 last year, Kenneth Clarke began his column: 'Remember 1979?' and went on to argue that while this dispute was not the same, the bad old forces were emerging. 'Now Labour have been thrilled by the success of Jimmy Knapp and his rail strike last summer and by the new mood of militancy in the TUC... This is still the old trade union-dominated Labour Party and they are still yesterday's men. 'Remember 1979,' he concluded.

When pressed by the *Financial Times* on why he would not put the dispute to arbitration, he said, 'It's the classic 1970s' way of ending a strike' (and therefore not to be entertained); and on why he did not personally intervene to end it: 'If you do that, as a history of the health service in the 1970s shows, you completely undermine and cut off the authority of your own management.' In a parliamentary debate in January, he dealt with the same demand that he intervene: 'Some car companies used to do that in the 1970s and it destroyed the authority of their managements.'

Formally, the ambulance staff are not in dispute with the government, but with the 'independent' management of the health service, headed by its chief executive, Duncan Nichol. The separation of government from workforce in public services was Lesson Number One of the 1970s. This is done most simply by handing over a service to private management - hence the phenomenal growth of private contractors. There is little doubt that successive Conservative health ministers would have chosen this option for the NHS if they could have got away with it.

The problem, as they have all found to their cost, is that they can't. Their opponents are formidable: powerful profes-

sional interests (notably the BMA); well-organised trade unions with intelligent leadership; and 'the public'. Even people who abandon the public health service for private care clutch at the NHS as a symbol - our last one perhaps - of a world in which caring, public service, need and equality take precedence over competition and making money. The public appears grimly determined to hang on to that token.

Kenneth Clarke is different from his predecessor, John Moore, in this vital respect. Moore flirted with the Right's ideas on reform, using their language of dependency and personal responsibility, as did Edwina Currie. Clarke does not.

He frequently protests his 'passionate commitment' to the NHS, and there is no reason to doubt this. But, and this is the key 'but' in the ambulance dispute, his notion of reform is essentially managerial and technocratic. He cannot concede any increase to the ambulance workers, because even a tiny percentage increase in staff costs 'can make all the difference between growth in services nationally and stagnation'.

What do 'growth' and 'stagnation' here mean? Mr Clarke's reformed NHS will be run by a newly authoritative management applying strict criteria of patient throughput, value for money and presti-

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gious standards of excellence. The idea that the quality of the NHS depends, at root, on the quality and size of the workforce, and that this in turn depends on their pay and morale, jeopardises his whole approach. By defining his reform in this managerial way, he has hung his success on not conceding to '1970s-type' militancy.

For all his eye on the future, including his own future, he has got himself into an impossible position - evidenced by the trail of colleagues pleading with him to compromise. The most devastating critique of his arguments against a pay mechanism, against arbitration, that an increase would be inflationary, came from his most eminent backbencher, Sir David Price, who sits on the Health Select Committee. Sir David stressed that far from there being any rationale in NHS pay, it was arrived at very haphazardly, allowing any number of acceptable options for the secretary of state to intervene and settle the dispute.

Kenneth Clarke has been flung any number of ropes, as Robin Cook said, to help him 'climb out of his hole'. He has rejected them all so far. In the end, he may win. In the process, he has squandered so much time, money and goodwill, it is likely to be a pyrrhic victory.

## Union Movements

The ambulance dispute represents a radical break from the past. It has put the government on the defensive. But does it offer a winning strategy for the public sector?

The key elements of the new approach are: to maintain the service, win public support and speak with one voice.

Maintaining the service has turned the old logic of industrial relations upside down and left the government in disarray. People who insist on working can't be called wreckers. Laws may stop people striking, but they can't be used to prevent ambulance crews going to accidents. And it is no longer possible to pose caring nurses against greedy strikers.

In going for public support the unions have broken with the tradition of disrupting your way to victory. And by using Roger Poole as sole spokesperson, they have adapted to the sound-bite politics of the 80s. Doing so has enabled them to send simple messages to their potential allies, the service users.

This new style is a recognition that disputes in the public sector are different. In industry, there is a direct relation-

ship between the level of disruption and the economic pressure on the company. In the public sector, interaction between the government, employees and the customer is much more complex. Here, traditional strike action allows the government to represent itself as the champion of the public interest against the self-interest of the greedy trade unions.

But increasingly unions have allied themselves with service users against the authorities. In last year's action the rail unions argued vigorously against overcrowding. In the building of the Channel tunnel it's the Fire Brigades Union that calls for extra safety measures.

However, these new strategies do have difficulties. Is it still possible to put sufficient pressure on the government to win? What new tactics will fit logically with maintaining a service and winning popular support?

In the past the aim was to put pressure on through picketing and sympathetic action by other unions. But those options are no longer appropriate. If the whole strategy of a dispute is to win public support by maintaining a service, then getting other workers to be disruptive defeats the object of the exercise. Old-style days of action which produce tv pic-

tures of closed schools and delayed commuters hardly fit the image of the new, caring, public employees.

The traditional march to Trafalgar Square involves only other trade unionists, leaving the mass of the population as passive bystanders. They can only wear a sticker or throw £1 coins in a bucket. Support becomes a private gesture which cannot be held up for the rest of the world to see. Without very public gestures union members will feel isolated. They may turn, in desperation, back to all-out strike action and inevitable defeat.

It is possible to turn individual support into a source of strength rather than weakness. Anti-Apartheid campaigners and environmentalists have been able to reach past the limitations of the labour movement to a wider audience through consumer boycotts. The red noses of Comic Relief and the big events of Band Aid show that massive displays of public opinion can be generated.

That does not mean abandoning union solidarity. Rather, it will be necessary to develop new styles that work with the grain of providing a service and winning genuine public support.

Some years ago, workers on the Paris Metro took action by

running the service but refusing to collect the fares. How would the government respond if ticket collectors on the underground did the same? If staff at a swimming pool refused to collect admission fees they could honestly say that they were showing solidarity without harming customers. And instead of closing down and losing pay, library workers could show their support by staying open an extra hour.

A strategy of winning disputes by mobilising public opinion throws into question all our notions of the right way to win. Traditional strikes are an assault model with the union throwing all its troops into a battle which must be won at a particular time in particular places. Unfortunately, public-sector employees end up assaulting their allies, the service users.

It may be necessary to adopt a much more long-term perspective. One where industrial action is only a small part of a strategy to win an overwhelming consensus of support throughout civil society. One in which the aim is not immediate victory or defeat. Rather, it becomes a mechanism or shifting public and government opinion towards new values for public service. •

*Jim Bewsher*