

Tackling strikes

I would welcome an update from the government on their response to the public sector strikes.

At the beginning the line was there was no point in talks between Ministers and staff where they are covered by a Pay Review body. The government had met this year's recommendations in full and would now concentrate on next year's evidence to the Pay Review bodies, as should the Unions. In the case of the railways the Unions should negotiate with management, not with Ministers, whether in Railtrack or the private companies.

Then Ministers shifted to saying they would talk about pay and conditions more generally, though not for the current year, and would attend some of the rail talks.

More recently there have been briefings suggesting backdated pay might be included in next year's settlement, with speculation for health over a one off cost of living payment this year.

Ministers should start by recognising the different background and issues in the different activities. The railway is hopelessly short of fare paying passengers to meet its current high costs. Government needs to get the extraordinary high subsidy levels of the covid period down. The challenge should be to the industry to award higher pay based on improved working practises and on selling more tickets.

Health is different. There is a bursting order book and many thousands of unfilled vacancies. There are problems retaining existing staff including some higher paid doctors. There are also low paid staff who are squeezed by the sharp rises in food and energy prices.

The Health service needs its promised workforce plan to secure enough staff overall, to ensure appropriate grading and pay bands, and to meet reasonable employee expectations about living with high inflation. If the PM and Treasury are against additional money for NHS budgets then the cost of medical staff pay has to be met from other savings within the large health budget.