LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Squeezing the smoker

PHILIP JOHNSTON

Within the next few weeks the Chancellor of the Exchequer will perform his annual disappearing trick, entering what is exotically known in government circles as Treasury purdah. Mr Nigel Lawson, in this self imposed exile, will be planning his budget strategy. He has already received submissions from his ministerial colleagues, eager to bend his ear to encourage the inclusion of their own particular pet policy proposal.

Last weekend the chancellor's team of ministers and officials met at his official residence, Chevening in Kent, to work out the general thrust of the budget package. It is, of course, a secret, but inevitably there will be leaks. It is a rare budget nowadays that has not been, to a greater or lesser extent, successfully predicted in the preceding weeks.

So I can begin the new year with one such forecast: Mr Lawson will increase the duty on tobacco by more than the rate of inflation. By how much more has probably still to be decided on, though with an early budget this year (4 or 11 March is the favoured date) such structural elements of the package will have to be agreed before the end of this month.

The chancellor already has in his possession a letter from the Secretary of State for Social Services, Norman Fowler, urging an increase in tobacco duty that will reflect the dangers to health of smoking. The industry is dreading the budget far more than the round of negotiations now under way in the Tobacco Advisory Council to thrash out a new agreement with the government on advertising and health warnings.

Tobacco companies know that an encyclopaedia full of medical evidence proving that smoking is harmful at best and lethal at worst will not dissuade the diehard addict from puffing away. But 10p slapped on a packet of 20 in the budget can have a major deterrent effect.

The political and social climate is also conducive to more stringent measures to persuade the smoker to stub it out for the last time. The smoker is becoming a pariah, a social outcast, ashamed of the habit, unable to light up in company without the pathetic rider, "Well, I don't smoke that many, only when I am out in the evening, and never at home, except for the odd one or two." But however socially unacceptable smoking has become, it remains legal. Ministers and most members of parliament wish to encourage and persuade people to give up, but they balk at any measures that could be construed as authoritarian.

Backbench moves to restrict smokers' rights

Within the next few months, however, there will be several backbench moves to introduce laws restricting the rights of the smoker. On 7 February George Foulkes, Labour MP for Carrick, Cumnock, and Doon will seek the approval of the House of Commons for a private Bill intended to limit smoking in public places.

"It will make non-smoking the norm in all public places with a separate area to be set aside for smokers wherever possible," he

says. "In public places where people only have to spend a short time, smoking would be completely prohibited. No one can argue a need to smoke if they only spend ten minutes in a bank or similar place."

The Bill would also specify certain non-smoking places for reasons of hygiene and employers would be required to provide smoking and non-smoking areas in the workplace. Mr Foulkes also proposes, in a late amendment to his Bill, to make it illegal to smoke in a car, arguing—though no evidence has been forthcoming to support this claim—that lighting up behind the wheel is a major contributory factor in accidents. "This is already the law in Norway and I am certain it would play a major part in cutting down the slaughter on the roads if introduced in Britain," he insists.

Mr Foulkes, a superb self publicist, has attracted a good deal of media attention for his Bill. What has perhaps not been fully understood is that it has virtually no chance of becoming law. The measure has not been introduced through the private members' ballot system but through the more arcane 10 minute rule procedure. It is rare for even the most innocuous and uncontroversial of proposals to get on the statute book through this parliamentary side door. When the Bill raises questions of individual liberty (one Conservative dubbed it "a stunning interference in people's lives") it has no chance at all unless backed by the government.

One of Mr Foulkes's backbench colleagues, the Labour member for East Lothian, John Home Robertson, has a better chance of success with his Bill to ban the sale of Skoal Bandits—small sachets of tobacco that are sucked—to the under 16s.

Labour's views

Last week Labour's health spokesman, Frank Dobson, attacked the government for allowing the United States Tobacco International Inc to set up a plant manufacturing Skoal Bandits with a £1 million grant from the Scottish Development Agency. He complained: "We shouldn't have to rely on private members' Bills to counter the promotional spending of tobacco multinationals: only action by governments will stop them in their aggressive tracks."

Mr Dobson urged the government to take a tougher line against the cigarette companies. A future Labour administration, he promised, will prohibit the sponsorship of sporting events by tobacco firms. (The Minister for Sport, Richard Tracey, is, incidentally, still negotiating with the industry on the renewal of the voluntary agreement governing the sponsorship of sporting events. Mr Tracey is, it is understood, pressing hard for the companies to agree to cut by £10 million over the next three years the amount spent on sponsorship—a 40% cut in their budget.)

Mr Dobson also wants a restriction on tobacco advertising in places where the under 16s can be influenced. To this end, a future Labour government would prohibit the advertising of tobacco products except at the point of sale. He is also pressing for a more effective health warning on cigarette packets—something that is likely to come about anyway as a result of the Tobacco Advisory Council negotiations currently taking place between the industry and the DHSS. But Mr Dobson would favour a novel message on packets, to wit: "Smoking affects the comfort and health of non-smokers."