LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Going up in a puff of smoke?

PHILIP JOHNSTON

Should tobacco companies be banned from sponsoring sporting events? The BMA thinks they should; so does the Labour party, though not some of its MPs. The government disagrees, but some Conservatives favour the idea. Such is the division of opinion that the chances of pushing a private member's Bill through the Commons to prohibit the cigarette companies from pumping an estimated £8 million a year into sport are next to none.

And so it proved when Conservative backbencher Roger Sims (Chislehurst) tried his luck recently. The procedures of the House require a vote to be taken on the second reading of a private member's Bill before 2 30 pm on the Friday that it is debated. If the discussion is still going on at that time it is adjourned until some future date, in the case of Mr Sims's Bill, 14 March. In practice, however, the measure goes to the back of a long queue of private members' legislation and is, to all intents and purposes, killed off. Mr Sims's Bill suffered such fate.

It is doubtful that this came as a surprise to Mr Sims or his supporters. The uninitiated who do not follow parliamentary proceedings closely, however, must be increasingly bemused by the plethora of proposed smoking legislation, which receives substantial publicity in the press and broadcasting media and then seems to sink without trace.

What, for instance, happened to George Foulkes's Bill to restrict smoking in public places? The original was withdrawn on 3 February after a revised version, the Tobacco Smoking (Public Places) (No 2) Bill was tabled. But shortly after the debate on Mr Sims's measure had been adjourned a list of private Bills still awaiting a second reading was read out by the deputy speaker, Ernest Armstrong.

If any of the measures are uncontroversial they are usually passed through on the nod. If contentious an MP or government whip can object, whereupon a specific date can be named for the second reading. But in the case of Mr Foulkes's Bill no day was named so it is unlikely to see the light of day again.

You could be forgiven for thinking that many MPs are less than committed to the measures that they put before the Commons, but that is to do the majority of them an injustice. The old hands are fully aware that certain pieces of private legislation have about as much chance of getting past their colleagues as Ferdinand Marcos has of owning a holiday home in the Philippines. The Commons, however, is not just a legislative chamber; it is also a forum for debate. And there are few better ways of generating public interest in a subject close to an MP's heart than to enshrine it in a Bill, however unlikely it is to succeed.

Sports sponsorship

This brings us back to sports sponsorship. The debate on Mr Sims's measure took place at a highly opportune time. The government, in the person of the sports minister, Richard Tracey, has opened negotiations with the tobacco industry to renew the voluntary agreement on sponsorship. The minister insists that the details of the talks must remain confidential; if he were asked during question time to expand on them he would refuse. The debate, then, gave concerned MPs an opportunity to make clear their own

reservations about the way that the agreement has operated and gave Mr Tracey an early warning of trouble ahead if he failed to tighten the rules.

The minister was not slow on the uptake. "I am considering seeking some changes to the agreement, bearing in mind the representations I have received," he said. "It is clear there is considerable concern about the amount of television exposure that tobacco companies receive through sponsorship. Many people see this as a way round the formal advertising bans and are particularly concerned by studies that have suggested that children believe that tobacco is advertised on television."

Mr Tracey added: "Of course it is not, and it has not been advertised for 20 years." Yet he went on to admit that there had been several possible breaches of the agreement, presumably where the exposure of a cigarette company's brand name has been such as to constitute an advertisement in all but name.

There are worries in Mr Tracey's department about snooker sponsorship in particular. About 176 hours a year are given over by the broadcasting companies to coverage of the game, which is almost exclusively tobacco backed. Only the most naive can really believe that the cigarette companies are altruistically inclined towards snooker; if they are, and the same applies to all sports, let them sponsor the games anonymously. The argument over whether tobacco companies sponsor sport in order to promote their brand is surely a false one; of course they do.

Effect of sponsorship on youngsters

The question must be, does sponsorship of sport encourage people, particularly youngsters, to smoke? Mr Sims quoted evidence compiled by Dr Frank Ledwith, research fellow at Manchester University, which found that children were "most aware of the cigarette brands which are most frequently associated with sponsored sporting events on television."

He added: "One could ask whether all this matters, whether it is important, and whether it has any effect. The fact is that children are a very good market for tobacco products. Recent figures show that 41% of children are smoking at the age of 16. This is a horrifying figure."

But his Conservative colleague Michael Knowles, who represents a Nottingham seat in the heart of tobacco country, claimed that the industry was concerned with brand share and not with encouraging young people to start up smoking.

Who is right? What is the cause and effect? The debate did not clarify the matter. Other members concentrated on the effect that banning sponsorship would have on sport or the effect that banning smoking would have on jobs, or the effect that not banning something to do with tobacco would continue to have on health.

But therein lies the rub. Smoking is legal and while it remains so any prohibitive measures must inevitably come to grief.

Mr Tracey was not inclined to go down the legislative road on the question of sponsorship, insisting that "the voluntary system of control remains the most effective way of restricting the industry's sponsorship of sport and its possible impact on the public."

There is, of course, a way of limiting that impact on youngsters, whom everyone realises are most at risk to carefully disguised entreaties to get hooked on the deadly weed. That would require a backbencher to introduce a Bill making it illegal for anyone under 16 years of age to smoke. Any takers?