LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Uphill struggle for Powell Bill

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Perhaps the safest thing to say about Mr Enoch Powell's Unborn Children (Protection) Bill is that even if it is dead it will not lie down. The Prime Minister, asked in the House of Commons by Mr Den Dover, Conservative MP for Chorley, if the government would allow enough time for the Bill's passage following the scenes in the Commons at its report stage, firmly ruled out the possibility. Mrs Thatcher said that she understood Mr Dover's concern and knew that the Bill aroused strong feelings in the House. She also felt strongly about it. In fact, although she did not say so, she is opposed to it. Then she reminded Mr Dover that it had not been the practice for the government to provide time for private members' Bills and she suggested that he should consult Mr John Biffen, leader of the House, who is in charge of business, and then delivered the coup de grâce. "I cannot give you any hope that you will get a different answer," she concluded.

So there it is. No government time will be provided. But the pressure is growing from the Bill's supporters. There are now 97 signatures to the motion tabled by Sir Bernard Braine, Conservative MP for Castle Point, asking for government time to be given. They come from all parties and include the former health minister, Sir Gerard Vaughan. What they want is for the debates to take place late at night after the government's business of the day had been dealt with. Mr Powell has already shown that he is not to be underrated, and when his Bill foundered amid angry scenes last week he carefully did not name a day for its return to the Commons. "Further consideration, what day?" asked the deputy speaker, Mr Harold Walker, who had allowed the question to be put to bring the debate to an end. "No day named," Mr Powell replied. After that the strong arm men were out trying to get somebody who had top position in the days left for private members' legislation to withdraw; they could succeed. There are more amendments and Mr Powell needs a full day for the third reading to be accepted as a proper debate, given the controversial nature of his Bill. I would probably bet money on his not making it, but on the other hand he has taken the Bill far farther down the parliamentary process than at first seemed likely and far beyond what less skilled backbenchers could have achieved.

During the brief debate—it lasted 93 minutes—Mr Leo Abse, Labour MP for Torfaen, said that in his intemperate zeal, for which he was notorious, Mr Powell had placed many of its provisions in the absolutist terms that became his temperament, and argued that they must be changed to ensure that no doctors, scientists, or nurses were placed in jeopardy under threat of the criminal law by their actions because of the Bill. In vetoing anyone procuring the fertilisation of a human ovum, privately and without sanction of some Whitehall bureaucrat, Mr Powell sought to draw into his net even those who might directly or indirectly have helped towards the fertilisation of a human ovum in vitro and had it in a laboratory for no sinister purpose and with no intention to defy the law, he said.

Mr David Crouch, Conservative MP for Canterbury, a member of the Medical Research Council, said that there were areas of uncertainty about in vitro fertilisation and the Bill did not clarify them. But there were criminal sanctions in the Bill, so parliament had a duty to protect those who practised in vitro fertilisation. It was extraordinary that a measure of such imprecision should have come from the hand of Mr Powell, he added. Mr Kevin Barron, Labour

MP for Rother Valley, claimed that the Bill would effectively stop all research and make in vitro fertilisation almost impossible. But Mr Frank Dobson, Labour's health spokesman, said that he would go even further. When people went to an infertility clinic humane, caring, and responsible doctors had to carry out tests if they were to do their job responsibly, and it would not be proper for the House to countenance anything that inhibited them from doing the job properly.

But they got no further. Mr Walker allowed the debate to be brought to a close—90 minutes on one amendment is a fair enough stint—and a row ensued, which ended in uproar. If Mr Powell makes more progress there will be more rows.

The Cabinet has spent far more time over Mr Norman Fowler's plans to reform the social security system than was originally intended. It has taken three meetings to reach agreement, and the green paper, promised for earlier this week—the target date was said to be 15 May—now looks like coming out, printers permitting, just before Whitsun. The argument over his plans has kept the Social Services Secretary fully occupied and, being a notorious "one issue at a time" man, has meant that he still has to turn his attention to the long delayed, much rewritten green paper on general practice. The word is, however, that there is still plenty of time for that summer publication promise to be kept and that the social security problems will not delay it. The document is, of course, basically the work of Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Health Minister, but it has to be approved by Mr Fowler and the Cabinet before it proceeds to publication, and there are those at No 10 who have strong views on its contents. Mr Fowler could well find himself embroiled in another argument with colleagues.

Rumour of 8% from review body

Meanwhile the social security problems seem to have stopped consideration of the review bodies' reports in their tracks. But it is said that the preferred aim is to get the decisions on all but the top people's salaries review body, which has still to be handed in, also out by Whitsun. The word has it that the doctors' and dentists' review body has come out with a figure somewhere around 8%, and that staging payments is not the flavour of the month, although that could change. But meeting the award in full will require cuts elsewhere. The 8% figure is, however, highly speculative. But there does seem to be little likelihood that the somewhat tense relationship between ministers and the medical profession is going to be relaxed by the review body's findings.

There is, however, one piece of good news for general practitioners at least, although of the ill wind that blows nobody any good type. At the same time as he announced the decision to abolish the emergency treatment fee payable to health authorities by motorists involved in road accidents, Mr Clarke also said that general practitioners would still be able to collect their fees in the usual way and they had been raised in line with inflation. The emergency treatment fee was £10.90 and has been updated to £13.32 from 1 April. General practitioners may claim it if they are the first to provide such treatment in the case of road accidents plus any travelling expenses incurred for the distance covered to effect the treatment. The Rayner scrutiny report, which proposed the abolition of the fees charged by health authorities, did not deal with the position of general practitioners because it was thought to be outside the scope of the inquiry.