LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Long, hot political summer?

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Once again we look like being in for one of those long, hot political summers in which speculation flourishes about things like government reshuffles. In much of what has been written the name of Mr Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, has not featured, mainly because it adds an awkward element to a forecast that can otherwise be quite neatly worked out. But it must be said that Mr Fowler would dearly love a move—preferably to Trade and Industry, should Mr Norman Tebbit find new pastures. Mr Fowler has laboured hard at the Department of Health and Social Security—it will be four years this autumn—and can, by his lights at least, claim that he has served the Prime Minister well. He is due for a fresh opportunity to expand his knowledge of government. Mr Fowler is an ambitious man and, while not the most charismatic of politicians, is not so modest as to think that he does not have a field marshal's baton in his dispatch box.

Certainly the social security reviews have so far done nothing to harm his prospects of promotion. The absence of detailed figures, for reasons which ministers can make sound convincing, has undermined some of the criticism—it is all a bit like fighting windmills. There is something big up there, but it is difficult to get to grips with it. He was also helped in the Commons by one of Mr Michael Meacher's more inept parliamentary performances. In politics sufficient unto the day is a favourite motto, and if there are to be rows they are some way ahead.

Mr Fowler certainly thinks that he is in a good position to hand over to somebody else. The work on the reviews has been done. Mr Tony Newton, the social security minister, would be more than capable of guiding the legislation through parliament, either in the top job or, should he not get promotion, backing up a secretary of state with rather more personality than he has.

The time has also come—and the Prime Minister has been told—when Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Minister for Health, should be given another job. The medical profession would probably see him go with a sigh of relief only slightly louder than his. Mr John Patten, the junior minister, could quite easily be promoted and is an altogether less abrasive type than Mr Clarke.

In politics ministers tend to go through a cycle: a year is spent learning the job, a year doing great works, and a year reaping the benefits, or not as the case may be, and if a minister survives beyond that he is into injury time. That is what has happened to Mr George Younger at the Scottish Office—he now holds the record, having been there for six years. Mr Fowler is heading into that territory.

In any case, the will she, won't she, when will she game could well go on for months, and in the end Mr Fowler may not be one of the players. But he deserves to be. The betting at the moment is that the reshuffle will be in September.

Enoch Powell's manoeuvrings

Mr Enoch Powell's legendary grasp of parliamentary procedure has never been shown to better advantage than over the manoeuvrings with his Unborn Children (Protection) Bill. Never-

theless, the whole issue of experiments on human embryos is really far too important to be left to private members' Bills and to such parliamentary goings on. Despite the successful filibuster against Mr Enoch Powell's Bill to ban experiments on human embryos in the Commons last Friday that is by no means the end of the matter. Mr Dennis Skinner and his supporters have merely postponed the day of reckoning by defeating the attempt to secure additional time for the Powell Bill. It was a classic case of somebody else exploiting Commons procedure with as much skill as Mr Powell did earlier to keep his Bill alive when he found a way of jumping the queue to get it before a standing committee.

The pressure on the government to legislate this autumn on the issues raised by the Warnock report will increase, and the Powell supporters will try to see that the government's Bill bans experiments and does not impose controls as is intended. The filibuster is an instance of the minority defeating the majority, or at least that is how the Powell camp will put it since it still has the will of the House as expressed in the second reading vote to call on. That has not been overturned.

If there is no government Bill this autumn—Mr John Biffen, leader of the House, apparently remains the stumbling block and wants it in the 1986-7 session—then Mr Powell's supporters will try again. If all those who voted for its second reading entered the ballot for private members' Bills they would stand a good chance of winning one of the places, which would guarantee a second reading at least. Even if that does not happen they will use the ten minute rule procedure, which is a request for leave to bring a Bill in. If somebody opposes the request, and they would be bound to do so, there would have to be a vote and the likelihood is that the opponents would lose, given that this is one of those issues on which many MPs prefer to keep their heads down.

So there is no question of relaxing vigilance for those opposed to what Mr Powell and his friends want.

Optimism on working of limited list

In the Lords Baroness Trumpington, the new health minister, was singularly optimistic about the way that the limited drug list scheme has been working. "We have been impressed by the smoothness of the introduction of the selected list and recognise that this is in large part due to the efforts of doctors and pharmacists," she said at question time. "We hope that it is now generally recognised that the selected list is a very sensible way of making better use of NHS resources without harming patients."

Then she announced that the plan is to set up the review committee, which will deal with appeals about the contents of the blacklist, within the next few weeks. As for the override mechanism that would allow a doctor to prescribe a drug—for individual reasons—not generally available on the NHS, she said that the response of the BMA to the government's proposals was still awaited.

And there the position remains. It is, I think, a measure of Mr Fowler's political luck that the limited list, which was not well handled in the setting up process, has not so far produced the kind of problems forecast. It may be just a case of so far, so good, but if he gets out of the DHSS before it goes wrong—if it does—then that will not matter.