LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

The Queen's Speech and private members' Bills

PHILIP JOHNSTON

Parliament has been reopened in stately fashion. The Queen's Speech was, as always, a glittering affair, the television lights sparkling in a hundred tiaras, the Lords hire shop temporarily stripped of its supply of ermine robes to clad the great and the good who had come to hear precisely what Mrs Thatcher's government has in store for us in the coming session.

To tell the truth, I am writing in ignorance of the precise contents of Her Majesty's speech. But no matter, the legislative programme is no longer a bolt from the blue, if it ever was. Ministers have long been giving strong hints, even outright promises, about their plans and policy priorities. For instance, we have known for some time that the speech would herald legislation on public order, privatisation of British Airways and the gas industry, social security reviews, parental rights in schools, drug trafficking, animal welfare, and wages' councils.

We have also known there would be nothing relating directly to health issues. Yet over the next 12 months a good deal of parliamentary time will be given over to medical and related matters.

We will await, with bated breath, the publication of the Green Paper on general practice, which, by the time it emerges into the sunlight, must be in danger of disintegrating with age. Barney Hayhoe, the Minister for Health, told the Conservative party conference in Blackpool that he expected its publication "later this year." Now we are told that the old problem of "slippage" has not been fully cured and the new year may already have been rung in before the Green Paper sees the light of day.

Even though the government may steer clear of health legislation, the individual member of parliament always has the chance to stir things up with a private member's Bill. Much depends on which backbenchers achieve a high place in the annual ballot to decide the pecking order for the presentation of Bills.

Any member of parliament in the first 10—unless he or she has a pet reform they have long hankered after getting on the statute book—will be set on by lobbyists eager to press them into championing their cause. Many of these pressure groups have ready made, off the peg Bills and back up public relations machinery that can make the member of parliament's task that much easier.

Last session it was Enoch Powell's Bill on embryo research that dominated the private legislation scene. Few would be surprised if in the coming 12 months an equally controversial issue—the Gillick judgment in the House of Lords—triggers a battle in the House of Commons.

Several Conservative backbenchers, should they succeed in the ballot, are thinking of introducing a Bill that would enshrine in law the rights of parents to know whether the contraceptive pill has been prescribed to their daughters under the age of consent. They believe that the Lords' judgment, which upheld the existing law, did not tackle the apparent contradiction of contraceptives being prescribed to children who, under another law, are proscribed from having sexual intercourse.

Mrs Gillick has asked for an urgent meeting with the health minister to discuss the implications of the ruling. Support for her continuing campaign came last week from Conservative backbencher Mrs Ann Winterton, who insisted: "Even those who have opposed us will accept that the issue is a crucial one which must be tackled as a matter of urgency." Mrs Winterton was particularly concerned about the harmful effects "of such powerful hormone drugs," and she is pressing for statistical information on the age, marital status, and geographical location of women being prescribed the pill to be collated centrally.

Mrs Winterton also wants provision to be made in the guidelines to doctors now being reviewed by Mr Hayhoe to require a general practitioner who prescribes "such powerful drugs to minors" without parental consent to give his reasons for failing to obtain such consent.

AIDS, drugs, and smoking

Another issue of considerable interest to MPs is the strategy being adopted by the Department of Health and Social Security to combat the spread of the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

The Chief Medical Officer, Dr Donald Acheson, is to the forefront of the campaign to heighten public awareness of the dangers. An extra £1m has been set aside by the government for treating victims and to fund research into the best way of handling the publicity side. Radio and television programmes alerting homosexuals to the risks of promiscuity and of giving blood are planned.

The DHSS is also preparing a series of video programmes as part of its war on the misuse of drugs. The first batch will be aimed at professionals, including doctors, who may come into regular contact with drug takers and will give advice on the tell tale signs of potential or actual addiction.

A new antismoking drive is also under way with the start of negotiations between the tobacco industry, health groups, and the government. A battle royal is in the offing. The cigarette companies were reluctant enough three years ago to accept the advertising strictures and other measures to discourage smoking proposed then. Witness their horror when, at a recent meeting of the Tobacco Advisory Council, they were presented with the opening gambit of the Health Education Council. It is proposing a gradual phasing out over the next three years of all tobacco advertising and sponsorship.

Meanwhile, the council wants the government health warning to take up 30% of the area of posters advertising cigarettes; for the warning to be carried on the front and back of packets; and for more dire prognostications about the consequences of smoking to be in the warning. Among the phrases now being considered are: "Smoking causes lung cancer and heart disease" and, bluntly, "Smoking Kills."

The present agreement between the industry and the DHSS runs out in March of next year. There is parliamentary pressure for members of parliament to debate any new proposals that emerge from the Tobacco Advisory Council. The junior health minister, Ray Whitney, who is the government's representative on the council, will clearly have his hands full.

So, "watch this space" for another year of controversy on health.