LETTER FROM WESTMINSTER

Limited list becomes law: minister proposes conference

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The limited list orders, flawed or not, duly went through both houses of parliament. In the end the discrepancies between the Scottish and English "blacklists" boiled down to two omissions on the Scottish one and one omission on the English one, but even if the worst fears of the Statutory Instruments Committee were not borne out—as I reported last week it had originally estimated over a hundred discrepancies because of shoddy drafting—it all added to the generally uncomfortable time ministers have been having over the whole affair.

The question now is whether the list is the thin end of the wedge. Mr Norman Fowler, Social Services Secretary, insisted that it was not, and that he did not intend to extend the list. But beware of ministers making categorical statements: they are a bit like Greeks bearing gifts. What will be interesting is the outcome of the conference he announced that he wants to convene. This conference would comprise the relevant professional interests to set the agenda for detailed discussions of further ways in which it will be possible voluntarily to raise prescribing standards and reduce costs.

Is it a trap? The point is that the medical profession in its opposition to the concept of the list and the government's arguments that it was a way of making savings argued that there were other ways. The conference is, or could be, an attempt to take them at face value, to make doctors put their money where their mouths are. Mr Fowler claimed that one of the benefits of such a conference would be to set in its proper perspective the selected list proposal. "The selected list is about putting resources to better use in the health service while protecting the clinical needs of patients, preserving the freedom of doctors to prescribe, and recognising the legitimate needs of the pharmaceutical industry," he added.

Meanwhile Mr Kenneth Clarke, the Health Minister, is trying to set up the appeals procedure under which it will be possible for doctors to prescribe drugs not on the list when they believe their patients need them in exceptional circumstances. The essential feature of that will have to be that it is not a way by which a doctor can simply ignore the list. The offer was, of course, part of an attempt by ministers to buy off opposition to their scheme, which comes into effect on 1 April, come what may.

The problem, as some Conservatives see it, was explained during the debate by Mrs Jill Knight, MP for Edgbaston, a voice to reckon with in that she is chairman of the backbench health committee, a body that ministers have to take heed of. She said: "It makes me feel sick when I hear members of the Labour party screaming for more and more money to be spent on the NHS, for when we seek to make savings they fight us all the way along the line. The waste of expenditure on drugs in the NHS is a national disgrace. There are hundreds of thousands of medicine cupboards in ordinary homes throughout the country that are jammed with NHS medicines that have not been used. Anyone who claims that general practitioners prescribe only what is necessary should ponder on the fact that some general practitioners give repeat prescriptions for years without ever seeing the patient. The regulations may not alleviate that practice, but over the years many efforts have been made to get doctors to do something about waste in drug prescribing. Unfortunately they have repeatedly failed to listen or to take note of the fact that the money they are wasting could be used to great benefit in

another part of the NHS. Many doctors prescribe merely to get the patient out of the consulting room."

Some people may find that contentious. But listen to Dr Roger Thomas, Labour MP for Carmarthen, who is a general practitioner. He believed that for the sake of bringing a degree of rationality back into prescribing there should be limited lists, but not limits pushed through at the behest of ministers who thought it high time they delivered a sharp left and gave the medical profession a bloody nose.

Out of all this Mr Fowler comes smelling of roses. His stock is rising rapidly. In the party he is seen as a man with a safe pair of hands, the likely heir to Mr Norman Tebbit as Trade and Industry Secretary in the promised autumn reshuffle. Mr Tebbit's move to be chairman of the party is generally accepted as inevitable. Mr Fowler could do with the experience of the other mammoth Whitehall department, and after a couple of years there his elevation to the Home Office—the job he is said to want—would present no great problems. By that time Mr Leon Brittan would be due for a move. So before the next election Mr Fowler could well be in the top three or four in the government, and if not before, then shortly after it if, as ministers now reckon, Mrs Thatcher leads the Conservatives to victory next time, albeit with a majority reduced to around 50 seats. The limited list row has been bitterly unpopular with the medical profession, but the electorate at large, it can be argued, takes a rather different view of the issue. And at the DHSS Mr Fowler has hardly put a foot wrong. If there have been rows the fall guy has been Mr Kenneth Clarke, Minister for Health. But that is a burden junior ministers have to bear.

Enoch Powell enjoying the parliamentary game

Mr Enoch Powell is, as one of his opponents on the standing committee dealing with his controversial Unborn Children (Protection) Bill said, "as tricky as a cart load of monkeys." As an opponent he is never to be underestimated. All the same, the chances for his Bill, which bans experiments on human embryos and is regarded by those who are against it as virtually blocking any action at all on the Warnock committee report, now seem none too good. The position is this. There are five Fridays on which the report stage of backbenchers' Bills are dealt with, and for a Bill to get through it has to come first on the day in question. All the days have now been taken up, so the best he can hope for is that one of the MPs whose Bill comes first will withdraw in his favour. That is what happened some years back to Mr John Corrie's ill starred attempt to amend the 1967 Abortion Act, and precious little good it did him. But Mr Powell is not Mr Corrie. Of the three Bills to which he could come second, assuming nobody else meanwhile gets in ahead (and that cannot be ruled out), Miss Janet Foulkes's Bill to curb kerb crawling and one to give the public greater access to local council meetings and papers are both substantial measures that will take up all the time available. The third Bill, which deals with road traffic documents, is slighter. But all will present plenty of opportunities for so minded MPs to talk until the day is exhausted. All Mr Powell will say is: "We are making progress." He is quite clearly enjoying the game. The committee may have sat long hours, but he at least showed no sign of weariness. The view of those who run the business in the Commons is that there are no magic loopholes left procedurally, and I agree. But with Mr Powell it is never wise to be too sure. His opponents, however, are claiming victory.