Letter from Westminster

Government backtracks on sick-pay proposals

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If ever a piece of legislation lacked friends it was the Employers Statutory Sick Pay Bill, which should have started its passage through Parliament last week. The opposition from both industry and the medical profession to the Government's scheme to make employers pay sick pay for the first eight weeks of illness has proved such that the Cabinet has decided to shelve the Bill for this session. Ministers are said to be determined to try again, the somewhat hollow reason for the decision being that alternative proposals have been submitted by the CBI to Mr Patrick Jenkin, Social Services Secretary, which merit careful examination. Considering that the consultations on the scheme began in April last year and that publication of the Bill had been fixed for the day it was axed, it is all rather odd. Even the CBI is not at all sure it has come up with something new. Ministers, however, are adamant that a new scheme will be drawn up and that there will be legislation.

Perhaps by the autumn they will have solved their differences with the medical profession over who pays for the cost of issuing sick notes, a vital aspect of the scheme. The Government was unwilling to pay GPs money for doing so and has been reluctant to set up a scheme of charges. Apart from anything else, the Prime Minister is pledged to no new NHS charges. The delay is a blow to the DHSS because it means it will not manage to reduce the number of Civil Service posts in the Department by the promised 5000. Some will go but the number will depend on the complexity of the substitute scheme. It should, however, still be possible to secure the promised £400m cut in public spending.

The scheme has been friendless since the start. The April 1980 discussion paper produced an instantaneous hostile reaction, and a mark-two version produced by Mr Jenkin before Christmas fared little better. His original intention had been to recoup the cost by reducing employers' national insurance contributions by 0.5%, later upped to 0.6%. He also suggested extending the period for which a sick note is not needed from three to seven days. But nobody—except the doctors—liked that either.

The delay has given ministers more time to sort out the problems of sick notes with the medical profession that talks over the last couple of weeks had failed to resolve—though these were not a factor in the decision not to go ahead. One reason for shelving the Bill was that being controversial it would have been heavily amended and used up a lot of Parliamentary time. Mr Francis Pym, the new Leader of the House, has been carrying out minor surgery on the legislative programme—the Health Services (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill was one early measure to go—and the sick-pay scheme, dear to Conservative hearts since it would have ended the state of affairs in which a man could be better off sick than working, is his most important piece of surgery to date.

Further proof that governments can change their minds is given by the Green Paper *Community Health Councils in England*. The original intention was to get rid of them, partly for

ideological reasons, but also because it would save money, and in the days when the ability to deliver cuts proved the worth of a minister this was a painless saving of £4m. In *Patients First* the Government's argument was clearly set out. After reorganisation of the NHS authority members would be less remote from local services and more closely in touch with the needs of the community. In these circumstances the need for separate consumer representation was "less than clear." Last July, however, Mr Jenkin reprieved the CHCs, though for how long nobody knew. Now they do, for the Green Paper leaves no doubt that they are a good thing. A factor which swayed the Government has been pressure from Conservative backbenchers who found CHCs a powerful force in local campaigns to save hospitals threatened with closure. The 1977 NHS Act provided that CHCs should represent the interests of the public in their district, and ministers are now convinced that they are the best means of ensuring that.

Socialist Medical Association speaks on manpower

The inquiry by the Social Services Select Committee into medical education still has some way to go. So as someone who has been a pretty constant member of the audience perhaps I could offer some advice to potential witnesses. To start with, co-ordinate your views beforehand. Secondly, beware of the blond-haired chap sitting on the chairman's left, especially when he leans back in his seat and peers across the top of his spectacles at you. He is Mr Nicholas Winterton, Conservative MP for Macclesfield, who specialises in provocation. The thing is—don't be provoked because you cannot win. Even the grandest Whitehall mandarins have been known to be cut down to size by a select committee getting its collective dander up. That was certainly what happened to the witnesses from the Socialist Medical Association the other day, mainly because of the tenor of some evidence submitted by its London and Home Counties Branch. The exchanges with the committee were, to say the least, tart. They began by telling the committee bluntly that unless the DHSS was given the power to manage consultants nothing would come of whatever conclusions it might reach.

"The majority of consultants are committed to full-time work in the NHS but have minor representation in the BMA and the royal colleges," the tendentious document went on. "These bodies have managed to manipulate the profession in the past, and the profession is becoming deeply dissatisfied with them. Less than half of all doctors belong to the BMA. The colleges' continued existence is based on their monopoly of professional qualifications and any political stance they take reflects only the views of their superannuated leaders. The fact that the present career problem is largely due to their lack of foresight should make any solution they propose highly suspect. The health of the people of this country is too important to be left in these inept hands."

After that there is not much I can say, except that the thought of Sir Douglas Black being considered inept was more than Mr Winterton could take.