Letter from Westminster

A little nearer to sense on seat belts

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Journalists are only too familiar with those two little words, "No comment." They tend to be used by people under pressure to say something in the belief that they are being totally non-committal. In fact, a lot depends on the context in which their words duly appear. The Transport Bill Committee has just voted to make the wearing of seat belts compulsory for children under 14 who travel in the front seats of cars and to ban babies under 1 year from the passenger seat next to the driver. A sensible change in the law, I would have thought, which ought to be followed up when the Bill returns to the Commons by doing the same for adults. Even Mr Norman Fowler, the Transport Minister, has at last grasped the implications of the abundant medical evidence in support of compulsion. Though he insisted it was not the thin end of the wedge for a general law on seat belts, he backed the change for children. Moving the proposal, Mr Barry Sheerman, Labour MP for Huddersfield East, said it could save the lives of up to 70 children every year and prevent many others from being crippled or badly damaged. "This is the International Year of the Disabled," he said. "Let us take a positive approach to the year." But listen to Mr Matthew Paris, Conservative MP for Derbyshire West: "The safety of children in cars is the responsibility of parents and not of the State." Or to Mr Cyril Townsend, Conservative MP for Bexleyheath: "We should respect crusaders, but not necessarily be overwhelmed by them. They are well intentioned, but they also come with the heavy hand of legislation and enforcement. They involve police officers in telling mothers how to look after the safety of their own children."

Since, unlike such utterances, no matter how daft, what I say is not protected by privilege, all I can say about arguments like that is—"No comment."

There is not much one can say either about the pushing and shoving that took place at the clerk's table when Mr David Ennals, the former Social Services Secretary, met Sir Ronald Bell, Conservative MP for Beaconsfield. Mr Ennals was there to table the seat-belt amendments (p 1247). Sir Ronald was there to see that his own amendments got in first, thus giving the anti-seat-belt brigade a tactical advantage. Mr Ennals was so annoyed that it sounded as if seconds would be out at any time, until the Speaker, Mr George Thomas, said it was a matter of privilege he would have to consider. Before he could rule tempers had cooled.

During the Bill's committee stage Mr Kenneth Clarke, the junior Transport Minister, said that the Government accepted that something needed to be done about the heavy drinker who drives. There was no reason why anyone with a drink problem should be treated differently from any other person with a disability that might render him a danger to others on the road if he held a driving licence. The Department was, therefore, working on the introduction of procedures that would enable them to withhold a licence from someone with a drink problem who could not provide satisfactory medical evidence that he had

cured his problem and was fit to be on the roads again. "We propose that any person who is convicted of two drinking and driving offences within ten years, both of them with blood alcohol levels above 200 mg, should be investigated by our medical officers for evidence of dependency on alcohol or of a drink problem," he added. The procedures to be followed would be similar to those already carried out by the Department's medical adviser when considering whether a licence should be withheld on other medical grounds, such as epilepsy. The advice of a panel of specialists on alcoholism would be sought about the procedures so that sensible and fair medical judgments could be made, he said.

Independent management advice

The Government's pursuit of increased efficiency in the National Health Service proceeds. Some details about its plans to set up a Management Advisory Service, which will provide regional and district authorities with independent management advice, were given by Sir Patrick Nairne, permanent secretary at the Department of Health and Social Security, in evidence to the Commons Public Accounts Committee. It seems that trial schemes are being launched in three regions, which, I gather, are North Western, Wessex, and South Western, with Oxford collaborating with South Western to provide an independent check on its scheme. The DHSS sees the possible development of an independent monitoring service as an important instrument in helping to meet the NHS requirements of parliamentary accountability, while at the same time avoiding undue participation in district affairs by regional health authorities or the Department. The scope of the MAS, which was mentioned in *Care in Action*, will be decided in the light of the trials, but the idea is for small teams of qualified health managers to be set up who will go in at regional or district level to look at particular problems and give an independent assessment aimed at improving the performance of management.

The idea of there being such an independent body has merit, because doctors are suspicious of change at the best of times, and all the more so when the proposals bear the dreaded imprimatur of management. The trials are expected to take about two years and have been set up by the regions, though with DHSS blessing. The Royal Institute of Public Administration, which has ideas of its own, believes that they are likely to be too much concerned with efficiency and getting value for money, and that what is needed is a system that will encourage change and the shifting of priorities between acute and long-term health care. It also thinks that the trial period is too short, and that between four and five years would be better so that proper evaluation could be made of the findings.

One other reason for caution is that the trials are anchored in the regions and could easily be seen as an additional source of power for them, which is not quite what the Government has in mind. It certainly sees the MAS as creating a link between districts and regions but belonging to neither. The formal announcement about the future of the MAS is due from the DHSS about now, and it may remove some of the fears.