Letter from Westminster

Seat belts: final hurdle in sight

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The House of Lords has duly decided by a handsome 40-vote majority—good whipping there by the British Medical Association, I suspect—to add Lord Nugent of Guildford's new clause to the Transport Bill making the wearing of seat belts compulsory. The voting was 132 for to 92 against. The argument about seat belts has been well ventilated over many years, and the pros and cons were certainly aired all over again by their lordships, so perhaps that will effectively be the end of the affair. The Commons will have to agree in due course to the change made by the Other Place when the Bill comes back to them, but the majority there in favour of compulsion has always been solid and this final hurdle should be an easy jump. The various attempts to legislate in the Commons have failed through either bad luck or the incompetence of those proposing the change—and, it has to be said, as a result of the skilful filibustering of those opposing it. This time, however, the remaining stages of the Bill in the Commons are subject to the guillotine so a filibuster will not be possible.

Under Lord Nugent's scheme there will be exemptions for deliverymen, people reversing, and people with a doctor's certificate advising them against wearing seat belts on medical grounds. Those who break the law will face fines of £50. Moving his clause, Lord Nugent, a Conservative peer and president of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, said that up to 700 deaths and 11 000 serious injuries could be avoided each year by compulsion. He also claimed that the numbers wearing seat belts would go up from 30% to between 80% and 90%, and dismissed the odds against the wearing of a seat belt actually causing death or an accident as 1000 to one.

There was a free vote in the Lords and there will be in the Commons when the time comes, and the Bill should get the Royal Assent before the House rises for the summer.

Another abortion Bill

If there is a sound that I have come to recognise in the corridors of the Commons it is the groaning of Labour's lady MPs faced with yet another assault by the antiabortionists on the 1967 Act. They have good reason for their keening, since the antiabortion lobby at Westminster is strong and the task of frustrating their attempts to wreck David Steel's Act means more and more arduous hours in standing committees and on the floor of the House for the tiny band of Labour ladies as each attempt is made. It is virtually an annual affair. So far they have always managed to win the day, but it has not been easy. That abortion will be raised again in the lifetime of this Parliament despite the defeat last year of Mr John Corrie's Bill was inevitable, but that it should be one of the Labour ladies who would resurrect the issue is a surprise. The difference, however, is that the Bill to be presented on 1 July by the redoubtable Miss Jo Richardson, Labour MP for Barking, is not intended to sabotage the Steel reforms but to ensure that they are implemented.

Miss Richardson says that Parliament's intention in 1967 was that terminations of pregnancy should be available on the

National Health Service. In some parts of the country they are available but in others they are not, and she regards such variations as indefensible. She points out that in 1979 in North Devon 94% of women needing abortions got them on the NHS, whereas in Dudley in the Midlands only 6% managed to do so. Mr Reg Race, Labour MP for Wood Green, one of the Bill's sponsors, believes that the consultants are to blame and that it is quite wrong for doctors to be able to deny women their rights and obstruct the will of Parliament. He and Miss Richardson are seeking, and will probably get, all-party support for their Bill, which is intended to place the onus on health authorities to provide alternative facilities where the consultants locally will not carry out abortions. They accept that they cannot compel doctors to do something that they don't wish to.

The aim is to ensure that 75% of abortions in any area are done on the NHS. The Bill is being introduced under the 10-minute rule, a procedural device under which an MP seeks leave of the House to bring in his Bill, makes a speech in its favour, and, if he is lucky, has someone on the other side oppose him. That way, if his luck holds, he gets a vote which, if he wins, is ammunition for any future attempt to urge his case and can ensure a little useful publicity in the media to boot. In Miss Richardson's case she can confidently look forward to being opposed, though the antiabortion people have yet to decide who will make the speech. It is impossible to predict what will happen in the subsequent vote but quite a lot of people will not bother to record their opinion. Abortion reform is not a topic that appeals to backbenchers, most of whom only want a quiet life. There are no votes to be gained by backing it, and quite a lot to be lost. It also means that they get on to the antiabortion lobby's mailing lists, and MPs get enough unsolicited mail without wilfully adding to it.

The Government's plan to put up the fees for examinations conducted by the Health and Safety Executive to cover the full economic cost met with some stiff opposition from Labour MPs when they moved a prayer against the new regulations. Mr Barry Jones, Labour MP for East Flint, a shadow employment spokesman, argued that all was not well and that the increase might discourage employers from using the service and might provide an excuse for irresponsible employers to evade using it to the considerable detriment of their employees. He also suggested that the effect would be to erode the Employment Medical Advisory Service and encourage the growth of the appointed doctor system. He wanted to know whether the BMA had dictated the increase in fees, which is of the order of 247%, and asked why it was that companies preferred the appointed doctor system by a factor of nine to two while the unions preferred the EMAS. Mr Bob Cryer, Labour MP for Keighley, claimed that many employees thought that if a doctor was employed the balance would be tilted in the favour of the paymaster, and for that reason the EMAS was important.

A stiff fight it may have been, but at the end of the debate there was no vote and the attempt to defeat the regulations failed. As for the reasons why so many employers opt for appointed doctors, I think the answer given by Mr David Waddington, Under Secretary for Employment, was, in the circumstances, admirable. "I do not really know," he said. Now there is a minister who should go far.