Letter from Westminster

Compulsory seat belts in 1982

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The 77-vote majority in the Commons in favour of making the use of seat belts in cars compulsory marks the end of a chapter but not quite the end of what has proved to be a long serial story. Mr Norman Fowler, the Transport Minister, who has all along opposed compulsion, was magnanimous in defeat, as well he might be, and has promised to bring in the necessary regulations to implement the decision in the next session of Parliament. Credit where credit is due, but the fact that this reform was not tackled straight away was because of Mr Fowler's refusal to have anything to do with seat-belt legislation when Mrs Thatcher gave him his present job. One Parliament cannot, of course, bind its successor, but in face of a whole series of votes in favour of compulsion and statistical evidence that the most ardent enemy could not refute Mr Fowler managed to sustain his resistance right to the end. The will of Parliament has, however, now been expressed in a way that it is virtually impossible to frustrate. So, what happens next?

Firstly, the Department of Transport will draw up a draft regulation which will be laid before Parliament early next session. Three months must then pass before the Commons decides whether to accept or reject it, and they will be taken up by the Minister in consultations with interested bodies, including the motoring organisations and representatives of the medical profession, in an attempt to establish an agreed line on what exemptions should be allowed. Pregnant women are an obvious case, though any sensible pregnant woman would be travelling in the back seat of a car in the first place. But all sorts of other people could find having to wear a seat belt an intolerable hindrance and they have to be considered.

The regulation will then be debated, probably around Easter, after which it becomes law. The most the opponents of compulsion can do is reject it as drafted and set the minister reconsidering what to do. They cannot, however, take away the obligation on him to introduce the legislation, and let me make that clear because, when I suggested that in spite of the power of the whips it was still just possible that the regulations could be defeated, I was sternly abjured by a Ministry of Transport official not to go around giving my readers the impression that compulsion is not going to come about. Well, perish the thought that I would, but when it comes to getting anything into law I am a firm believer that the old saying about the multiplicity of slips between cup and lip has a lot going for it. The regulations themselves are also only the end of the matter for three years. The position will then be reviewed and Parliament asked in the light of the evidence whether to reintroduce them.

Mr David Ennals, the former Social Services Secretary, who led the fight in the Commons—the battle was won in the Lords where the Bill was amended—said he was delighted with the Commons' decision. He admitted that he had been worried—the free vote took place on the eve of the Royal Wedding—that not enough people would stay behind but the turnout had proved to be very good. "There is still a lot of work to be done," he added. "We will have to have consultations on the exemptions, and I very much approve of the fact that the Minister will make a statement before laying the regulations so we can see what he has in mind. I also approve of the fact that it will be reviewed after three years. It is perfectly reasonable we should have to prove our case, and that should remove quite a lot of fears."

Mr Ennals added that if compulsion were seen to fail then the House would be reluctant to make the regulations permanent or to continue them for even another three years. The proof of the pudding, so to speak, would be in the tasting. Not that he can have any doubts about the beneficial effects of compulsion. The statistics have been consistent. The general use of seat belts could save up to 1000 lives and between 10 000 and 12 000 accidents a year. It has taken a decade to get this far and eight attempts at legislation. That is a sobering thought, considering there is still another six months or so to go.

One side effect is that it should save the DHSS £18m a year but ministers are none too sure that this is not a "benefit" that the Treasury will take into account to their disadvantage.

Dr Gerard Vaughan has promised in a written Commons reply that the Government will introduce legislation on payment for "suspended" doctors "as soon as the Parliamentary timetable allows." Written questions fall into at least two categories: those where the MP wants to find out the information for reasons of his own, and those where he has been put up to it by somebody else—sometimes an outside pressure group, sometimes a Government department. In this instance, I cannot say with any certainty, and it may well be that Mrs Jill Knight, Conservative MP for Edgbaston, who asked the question, did so from deep personal interest. Be that as it may, there are at present no statutory arrangements under which health authorities can make such payments, though they can do so on an ex-gratia basis. The Government has been intending to change the law for some time so that a doctor's terms of service will remain unaltered when he is in receipt of sick pay, and to ensure that when suspension is lifted he is able to return to his previous job.

The intention was for the change to have been included in the Health Services (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill promised for the session which has just ended. But that fell victim to the pruning exercise carried out in the spring by Mr Francis Pym after he became Leader of the House. The Bill, however, is still on the stocks at the DHSS and ministers have been arguing in its favour in the current battle over what is to be included in the 1981-2 programme. The DHSS is hopeful that its case, which is a good one, has been accepted, and Dr Vaughan's reply to Mrs Knight about what he intends to do in the light of the decision by the House of Lords in the Tarnesby case—the Lords' judgment was that Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster Area Health Authority (Teaching) was wrong to have held a post open for a doctor suspended from duty—would seem to imply that he anticipates being able to act.

With the House up for the holidays until 19 October, a tale to bring things to a suitable end. Sir George Young, the junior Health Minister, was required the other day by his secretary to do some photocopying, a task with which after two years in Government he is not as familiar as he would otherwise be. Off he went to the nearest photocopying machine in the Commons annexe, the old Scotland Yard building, where he duly ran off several copies of the document in question which itself ran to a good dozen pages. The next job, so wonderful are the machines available to MPs, was to line up the pages and staple them together. Sir George duly put the lot in the adjacent machine and waited for the neat bundles to emerge at the other end. It was when this did not happen that he discovered the machine he had chosen was a paper shredder.