Letter from Westminster

For and against generic prescribing

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Mr Norman Fowler, the Social Services Secretary, rather pulled the rug from under the feet of Mr Mike Thomas, health spokesman for the Social Democrats, last week in the Commons over the Greenfield report on generic prescribing. Mr Thomas turned up for social services questions to ask Mr Fowler if he would now publish the report, which has been in his hands since last February. All the indications have been that ministers had no inclination to do anything of the sort. "Yes sir, shortly," replied Mr Fowler. Mr Thomas, however, clearly failing to catch the reply, went on with the question that he would have asked had it been what he anticipated, much to the delight of his many friends on the Labour benches. Action was required now, he said. Even the pharmaceutical industry conceded that at least £50m would be saved by implementing the report. It would also stop the "soap powder style" of promoting drugs, he claimed.

It was a moment to savour. The report should have appeared by now, and the indications are that in due course Mr Fowler will take action on it. But first of all there will be consultations. This does seem to be a change of attitude, but every now and again an issue becomes politically sensitive, and both the Labour and Social Democrat parties have seized on generic prescribing as an issue that they see as one they can exploit. In election year you do not leave such cards in your opponents' hands, particularly as the Commons select committee on public accounts has gone back once again to the whole issue of the size of the National Health Service drugs bill. So it would seem that ministers have conceded that there is a case for extending generic prescribing into general practice.

"Me too" drugs

Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody, Labour's health spokesman, who is strongly in favour of it, said that it was clear that the majority of the thousands of drugs used in this country were "me too" drugs and not the result of original research and development. She urged Mr Fowler to consult the medical profession, which knew the contribution that generic prescribing could make to the NHS, as well as the drug companies.

He said that he would, but pointed out that the drug industry was responsible for net exports worth about £570m to this country and employed 70 000 people. That was important and the industry had to be consulted.

Mrs Dunwoody, commenting on the activities of the industry, told a Fabian Society meeting that drug companies were currently mounting a campaign to convince everyone that the Greenfield report should be buried. Not because their drugs were better, but because "these frail multinationals" would not be able to survive without the profits they made from charging the NHS an extra £170m for drugs because they spent so much on research and development. "This argument is, of

course, rubbish," she added. "Far from being frail, drug companies have growth records that must be the envy of every other manufacturer in Britain." Another factor that has weighed in the balance is the increasing concern among MPs at the methods that the companies are using to promote drugs and to persuade doctors to use them. Both Mr Thomas and Mrs Dunwoody have been drawing attention to this. Mrs Dunwoody, for instance, has received several complaints from doctors about one firm that invited them to spend an evening on Henry Ford's yacht, describing the vessel at tempting length in the invitation while saying next to nothing about the product.

Another decision that looks like coming shortly is what action to take on the Acheson report on the problems of inner city practices. The delaying factor is that Mr Fowler is due to visit Libya at the beginning of February and the announcement must await his return. But it seems that an answer has been devised about how to persuade elderly doctors to cease practising, without ending up giving them a lot of money to retire after which they return to carry on as before.

Getting referred to privileges committee

By now there must be few people in the land who do not know about Mr "Red" Ken Livingstone, chairman of the Greater London Council. A skilled self publicist, his latest "achievement" has been to get himself referred to the Commons select committee on privileges over advice he may or may not have issued to London's MPs. He claims to have been misrepresented. All that, however is by the way. The point is that Mr Livingstone made the headlines. It is all the more strange, therefore, that a reference to the privileges committee of two other skilled self publicists slipped past virtually unremarked.

On 8 December last year Mr Terry Davis, one of Labour's health spokesmen, wrote to the Speaker, Mr George Thomas, following the judgment in a libel suit in the Queen's Bench division in which Thomas William Pound won damages, substantial and exemplary, from Michael Hugh Litchfield and Susan Joy Kentish, the authors of a well known book called *Babies for Burning*. That was a private letter, and Mr Davis did not publicise what he had done. On 21 December Mr Speaker, having considered the submission, gave permission for Mr Davis to table a motion referring the matter to the privileges committee, which was passed the next day on the nod. He told the House that one of the effects of the judgment in Mr Davis's view was "to make it clear that the two defendants had lied when giving evidence before the select committee on the Abortion (Amendment) Bill in July 1975." This was the Bill moved by Mr James White, Labour MP for Glasgow Pollok.

Mr Davis will not comment on the affair beyond what was said in the House. But the point is that they did give evidence to the select committee on the urine testing allegation that was the subject of the libel suit, and that being so it does raise questions whether they committed a contempt of parliament or a breach of privilege in that evidence.