Letter from Westminster

Abortion Bill in overdrive

WILLIAM RUSSELL

The Abortion (Amendment) Bill, which has been languishing in its House of Commons committee for six weeks, is about to go into overdrive. Mr John Corrie, Conservative MP for Bute and North Ayr, the Bill's sponsor, faced with opponents who,

he believes, are opposing not for opposition's sake, but to destroy his Bill, has decided it is time to bring in a sittings motion. This means that instead of meeting once a week on Wednesday mornings for a two-and-a-half hour session only, the committee will probably have to meet all day on Tuesdays and Thursdays as well. They will also sit on Wednesday afternoons—and such sittings are open-ended and can last all night. Mr Corrie's feeling is that if he must table a sittings motion to get his Bill on the move—the target day for the

report stage in the Commons is 8 February—then it might as well be “a hefty one.” A week has to be allowed for printing the Bill and that leaves five more “working days” because of the interruption of the Christmas recess.

In this, the sixth sitting, the committee finally completed debating and amending Clause 1, the heart of the Bill. The clause lays down the 20-week limit for termination of pregnancy and sets out the grounds on which an abortion can be carried out. A revised version of Mr Corrie's clause moved by Mr William Benyon, Conservative MP for Buckingham, was adopted at the end of the sixth sitting with two amendments.

Mr Corrie accepted an amendment put forward by Dr Oonagh McDonald, a “non-medical” doctor and Labour MP for Thurrock, who is leading the opposition to the Bill. This deletes a requirement that a doctor's opinion on termination should have been formed on the basis of individual examination alone. The anti-abortionists on Mr Corrie's side of the committee defied him—and rejected the advice given by Mr Nicholas Fairbairn, Solicitor General for Scotland—by inserting back into the Bill the grounds of “serious injury.” These were in the original Bill, but Mr Benyon's amended version of the clause, with Mr Corrie's approval, had excluded them. Mr Corrie hopes that he will be able to take the adjective back out when the Bill is at report stage and he will probably get the Government's backing.

“Bombshell” letter on time limit

As the Bill stands—and no further changes to this section can now be made by the committee—the upper limit is 20 weeks and the grounds for an abortion are “that the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk to the life of the pregnant woman or of serious injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman or any existing children of her family, substantially greater than if the pregnancy were terminated.”

That is not to say that the question of the time limit has been settled. The definitive advice on that had appeared to have been given at the committee's fourth sitting when Dr

Gerard Vaughan, the Health Minister, advised the MPs that it ought to be 24 weeks (24 November, p 1377). Mr Corrie, however, now intends to propose it should be 22 weeks at the report stage, despite having given every indication of being prepared to accept Dr Vaughan's advice.

This change of heart—the Minister, after all, had told the committee that 22 weeks would be “the worst of all worlds” and would create great problems for the medical profession—was the result of a letter to Dr Vaughan from Professor O E R Reynolds, the professor of neonatal paediatrics at University College Hospital Medical School. The anti-abortionists later described it as “a bombshell.” Mr Corrie clutched at it like a drowning man a straw, since he is besieged on all sides over the time limit issue and here, it seemed, was the definitive case.

Professor Reynolds's letter, written two days after the minister had given his original advice, said that not many infants are born at 24 and 25 weeks, but a few—although he would not like to put a percentage on it—survived. “We occasionally admit babies born at 23 weeks' gestation, and while none has yet survived, it is inevitable that one will, sooner or later,” he added. “Infants born at 23 weeks are, incidentally, sometimes very much alive at birth—whatever you may hear to the contrary.”

The professor, a leading expert on premature births, went on to say that no properly authenticated infant born at 22 weeks had survived anywhere in the world, so far as he was aware, and that it was, from his own experience, unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. “I believe that 22 weeks should be set as the upper limit for therapeutic abortions,” he said.

Dr Vaughan is considering the letter but the fact that he brought it to the committee, clearly aware of the impact it would have, makes his support for Mr Corrie's attempt to amend the Bill virtually certain. Dr McDonald viewed the whole incident with scepticism, inevitable in one who has endured the abortion battle before.

In the partisan world of the abortion issue it is easy, I know, to be suspicious but somebody somewhere was clearly being asked to write a letter to Dr Vaughan. No sooner had Dr Vaughan made his pronouncement in the fourth sitting on the desirability of 24 weeks than Mr James Dunn, Labour MP for Kirkdale, asked him if he would re-examine what he had said about 22 weeks if it were to be indicated to him by letter—or some other means—that there was a live birth at 23 weeks or 24 weeks. “I have a feeling this may come about,” he added. His feeling proved to be right.

Mr Corrie sees the letter as having saved the committee from acute embarrassment. It would, he said, have been a disaster to have gone for 24 weeks as Dr Vaughan had advised and the letter had then arrived. “We would have had egg on our faces,” he claimed. If the letter proves anything, apart from the quality of the opinions contained in it, it is that the way to influence MPs is not to bombard them with propaganda. The single, authoritative letter can be far more effective, although in this instance Professor Reynolds, not himself aligned in any way with either side of the issue, was writing to the converted.

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