Letter from Westminster

A step nearer to belting up

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The fifth attempt by Parliament to make the wearing of seat belts by car drivers and front-seat passengers compulsory

looked at one stage as if it was going to be bogged down in the Commons committee considering the Bill. Its opponents—mainly Conservative MPs who see it as an attack on the freedom of the individual—were indulging in long-winded if fascinating and well-researched speeches. The committee, for instance, was treated to a lyrical description of the third of a mile drive leading to the farmhouse home of Mr Ivan Lawrence, Conservative MP for Burton, who practises at the criminal bar. It is apparently lined

with chestnut trees, which, he said, "when in full bloom in summer and autumn are a lovely sight." This was not quite as irrelevant as it might seem, since what Mr Lawrence was trying to do, with many a legal reference, was to define when a road is not a road, devoting to the task all the eloquence the ancients used to spend on deciding how many angels might dance on the head of a pin. The point is that he was in order but the effect of such speeches was that, three days into its committee stage, the Bill was getting nowhere.

Mr Neil Carmichael, Labour MP for Kelvingrove, its sponsor, is not, however, downhearted, and it does seem that this could be the attempt to change the law that will succeed. He reckons that at last rational opposition to his measure is crumbling—irrational opposition is, of course, not prone to do that—and that even those against it on the grounds of personal freedom are prepared to give way. He has also been promised that it will be through committee ready for its report and third reading on Friday, 22 February. This has something to do with the backstage manoeuvrings that have given the Corrie Bill to amend the 1967 Abortion Act the two preceding Fridays for its report and third reading stages.

At one time rapid progress for the Seat Belts Bill could have prevented that and the delaying tactics in the committee were not related only to the possible deficiencies of the Bill. Seat belts have been fitted in the front seats of cars since 1965 and last August the Government introduced regulations which will make it compulsory for anchorage points for belts to be fitted in the rear seats of cars manufactured on or after 1 October next year and first used on or after 1 April of the following year. The purpose is to make fitting belts in the rear seat simpler and cheaper than at present should an owner wish to have them.

The saga of the various attempts to make wearing seat belts compulsory by both Labour and Conservative Governments has been dogged by incompetence and misfortune. Bills ran out of Parliamentary time, which was incompetence, or they fell victim to a General Election, which was just bad luck. That was what happened to the Bill introduced last year by Mr Bill Rodgers, Labour's Transport Minister. The incoming Conservative Government could have picked it up, but the new minister, Mr Norman Fowler, was not keen on it. He believes

that compulsion would have a detrimental effect on the relations between the public and the police and has taken a neutral attitude.

It was left to Mr Carmichael, a former junior Transport Minister, to come to the rescue when he won second place in the ballot for backbenchers' legislation. He has copied the Labour Bill, which would impose fines of £50 on offenders. Given that the Government is dedicated to saving money, Mr Fowler should surely change his mind and lend a little active support. In January last year Sir Henry Yellowlees, Chief Medical Officer, reported that if all motorists and front-seat passengers wore seat belts it would prevent 1000 deaths and 11 000 serious injuries from accidents a year as well as saving £100m.

At present only about 30% of car travellers use seat belts. The objections to the proposals also concentrate on the problems of enforcement and a law that cannot be enforced is bad—perhaps even worse than the ill it is intended to remedy. It is better, the opponents argue, to educate people to behave responsibly. That figure of 30% and the fact that the fitting of belts has been compulsory for 15 years shows that the educative process has not worked all that well. Research by the Automobile Association, which favours compulsion, has shown that if compelled to do so by law 90% of car users would wear their seat belts. If that is the case, the enforcement problem ought not to be as large as all that; and the police, whose job it would be, while not pretending it would be easy, have come out in favour of compulsion.

Weight of evidence behind sponsor

The weight of the evidence is behind Mr Carmichael, who says that the people at what he calls "the sharp end" of road accidents—the police, the medical services, and so on—support him, pointing to the amount of medical skill and scarce financial resources used up in dealing with accident victims who need never have been accident victims. He accepts that should his Bill become law there will one day be an accident resulting in injuries for which the victim's seat belt will be blamed but he draws attention to the fact that reports of such incidents are now few and far between—and to the improvement in seat-belt design. His Bill got its second reading on a free vote by 134 votes to 59 so it should continue safely enough, though how the Lords will react is anybody's guess. After all it was the Lords who threw the proposal out in 1974.

Perhaps the message for those who will have to take the decision to bear in mind is contained in the remarks of Mr Mike Read, director of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, at the time the Bill was published. "Any MP who has condemned public service strikers for putting lives at risk by their action is being hypocritical if he does not support the Seat Belts Bill," he said.

Some small indication of the temper of the Commons might be the fact that Mr George Robertson, Labour MP for Hamilton, a car accident victim, was given leave to introduce a Bill the other day banning children under 13 from the front seats of cars. There is no time for his Bill to proceed so it was essentially a Parliamentary water-testing exercise. The point is that nobody thought it worth while objecting.