Letter from Westminster

Commons worry about topless go-go dancers

WILLIAM RUSSELL

No strip shows, one-armed bandits, or bingo marathons will be allowed to sully the attempts by the health authorities to raise money for the NHS under the powers given them in the Health Services Bill. The debate in the committee on the Bill these last two or three sittings has been highly imaginative, to say the least, since Mr Roland Moyle, shadow Health Minister, who is leading for the Opposition, and his colleagues have raised all sorts of spectres. At one point Mr William Hamilton, Labour MP for Central Fife, claimed that the mind boggled at what could happen. Well, mine certainly did at some of the events he and his colleagues foretold. Sir George Young, the junior Health Minister, was not impressed but did concede that even if the Bill did not require amending the Government were going to issue guidance on what would be permissible.

Bingo and gaming machines are already barred under existing legislation but he agreed that it would be possible to have games of chance if they were not the main attraction. The Government, it transpired, had no objection to such activities if they were similar to what takes place at Tory fêtes and bazaars. The "unsuitable activities" will include striptease and topless go-go dancers; events which exploit women or children; and the giving of large quantities of cigarettes or drink as prizes. Sir George pointed out that the Bill did contain a reserve power to prohibit specified activities and this could be used as a last resort. Meanwhile it seems that there will be guide-lines galore.

Guidelines will also be issued telling the authorities which premises they may use and what use they may make of them. This was elicited by Mr Geoff Rooker, Labour's junior spokesman on the Bill, who is under the belief that a British bazaar is like the one he visited once in Tangier and heartily disapproved of. He made a great to do about the use to which authorities might put their premises, claiming that the headquarters of the Birmingham AHA—he is MP for Perry Bar—were so luxurious they could stand a two-day bingo session. It used to be that the goods in oriental bazaars were made in Birmingham. It could be that it was because this is no longer so that Mr Rooker was so annoyed at what he saw in Tangier. Sir George has, however, invited him to Acton Town Hall next Christmas to see how the Ealing Conservative Association runs its bazaar.

Progress on the committee stage of the Bill has been slow. The result is that it is now meeting on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons as well as in the mornings. There has been no filibuster but a lot of talking and the additional sittings have been agreed with the Opposition, who are just as keen as the Government to get the work done on the Bill by Easter.

Quick death to abortion reform

It now looks as if John Corrie's Bill to amend the 1967 Abortion Act has used up the last of its nine lives following his decision to withdraw the measure from the Order Paper. Only last-minute pressure from his sponsors could change his mind and most of them seem to favour a quick death to a lingering one. The Bill was due to return to the Commons on 4 July, the next day for private members' bills. The failure to reach the third reading on its last appearance on 14 March effectively consigned it to the Commons scrap heap. A third reading reached would have put it at the top of the list for July and given it the ghost of a chance of making progress throughout the summer. But now there are four Bills ahead of it and none, let alone all of them, will be withdrawn in its favour.

The reason for keeping it technically alive, despite that, would be in the hope that this would give time to whip up public pressure on the Government to come to the rescue. That would, however, seem to be beyond even such seasoned propagandists as Mr Corrie's friends. In any case the Health Ministers want nothing to do with it and have started discussions with various interested organisations, including the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, about voluntary guidelines on a lower time limit for abortions.

Glasgow's "Hell hospital"

All doctors toiling in nice new, custom-built premises that somehow have failed to live up to expectations can take some comfort from the fact that the Greater Glasgow Health Board has started arbitration proceedings aimed at recouping £7.25m from those responsible for the defects which resulted in the Glasgow Royal Hospital for Sick Children being nicknamed "Hell Hospital." Opened by the Queen in 1971, the hospital cost £5m and was supposed to be the most modern in Europe. Its subsequent history, according to Mr William Hamilton, has been a catalogue of disasters, which have ranged from the need to rip out the entire plumbing system to the replacement of the windows because they could not be opened wide enough to provide adequate ventilation. "The whole roof is leaking and needs to be replaced," he told the Commons during a debate he had secured on the NHS in Scotland. He was rewarded for his initiative by extracting from Mr Russell Fairgrieve, the Scottish Health Minister, the news of the action being taken.

Mr Fairgrieve turned down demands for a public inquiry on the grounds that it could prejudice the attempt to obtain restitution by legal means from the parties held liable for the defects that had to be remedied. "When the present arbitration has taken place and the legal position is remedied, when—as we hope—we win our case and obtain restitution, the lessons must be gone into very seriously," he added. "We hope that those responsible will be made to pay."

And so say all of us taxpayers. Some comfort can also be taken from the fact that the matter is being investigated by the Public Accounts Committee, the most powerful and senior of the all-party select committees. Their report should be worth waiting for.