Letter from Westminster

Abortion reform: Commons accept 24 weeks

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The hole blown in John Corrie's attempt to amend the 1967 Abortion Act shows how one can never take the House of Commons for granted. It had looked last Friday as if no progress would be made and then suddenly came the vote on an amendment moved by Charles Morrison, Conservative MP for Devizes, and William Hamilton, Labour MP for Central Fife. The result was that out came the 20-week limit—in went 24 weeks. The change was made by 275 votes for to 172 against, with Mr Corrie refusing to say what he would then do. It just shows the influence of senior backbenchers. A group from the three major parties—including Edward du Cann, chairman of the 1922 Committee; Jo Grimond, the former Liberal leader; and two former Labour ministers, Mr Fred Mulley and Mr Arthur Bottomley—had issued a call to everyone to unite behind the 24-week upper limit.

Dr Gerard Vaughan, the Health Services minister, lent his weight to the call. He gave five reasons: doctors always worked up to two weeks below the limit, so effectively it would be 22 weeks; errors can occur in conception dates; from 17 to 24 weeks is the time when tests for fetal abnormalities are done; the overwhelming majority of professional organisations want 24 weeks; and there is no authenticated case of a fetus surviving below 24 weeks. He also pointed out that the 20-week limit would require so many exceptions as to be rendered irrelevant.

The Corrie Bill could still proceed but it depends on what happens to other private members' Bills, including the Seat Belts Bill, which has completed its committee stage. The 24-week decision was taken for the good and simple reason that most MPs, as even Mr Corrie and the man behind him, Mr Bill Benyon, Conservative MP for Buckinghamshire, admit, are "bored stiff" with the subject. They regard 24 weeks as a compromise; and as for all the other issues in the Bill—they just don't want to know.

What most MPs want is for the issue to be settled for a good long time to come. If there is one thing the average backbencher detests it is a conscience issue, which sends the pressure groups into a tizzy and deluges him with literature and letters from constituents. Moral issues demand public stances and these can cost votes. Whether there are votes to be gained by backing abortion law reform is an open question, though it did not do David Steel any harm. That there are votes to be lost many a backbencher is convinced.

The dilemma confronting Mr Corrie and his supporters now is whether to try to salvage things by reaching a compromise or whether it is better to be defeated totally and lose the Bill. That way they at least would live to fight another day. So far as Mr Benyon is concerned the important things are the time limit, the criteria, and the conscience clause. That does mean he would be prepared to ditch a lot of controversial material. If the debate last week had a striking moment of oratory, it came from William Hamilton, who, after screwing up a

pamphlet issued by "Life," containing graphic pictures of aborted babies, declared: "If I am to take advice on these matters, I am prepared to accept it from world famous doctors, not from a vociferous tribe of celibate priests, nuns, and a simple Scottish farmer."

Mr Benyon's experiences of reform have left him somewhat disenchanted with the medical profession. "Doctors are an absolute pain in the neck," he told me. "Next to farmers"—he has a rural constituency—"they are the most difficult people to deal with." He says that he has received hundreds of letters from doctors saying they do not agree with the line taken by the BMA on the issue. When he says they ought to do something about that—he thinks trade unions and professional associations can fall into the hands of people who do not necessarily reflect the views of the membership—he gets letters back saying they have just resigned. One thing that gives him some consolation is that this time round he has been able to visit colleges and universities to speak about the Bill. When he was trying to get his own Bill through he dared not go near such places.

Mr Corrie is very much the man in the middle of the whole affair—assailed from both extremes of the argument. He does claim, however, to have the gift of second sight, which makes it all the more strange that he should be so devoted to trying to get through a Bill most MPs less gifted would have refused a second glance.

Contractors v direct labour

One plan currently intriguing ministers—Mr Patrick Jenkin, Social Services Secretary, is particularly taken with the possibilities—is to encourage the use of private contractors in the NHS. It has been calculated that using such contractors instead of direct labour for the whole range of ancillary services—catering, security, portering, cleaning, gardening, and so on—could lead to savings of up to £100m a year. The savings on domestic cleaning alone are said to be around £25m. Clearly such sums are worth looking at, given the need to cut spending and save money that dominates Government thinking. The problem—difficulties with the unions apart, and careful negotiation could maybe overcome those—is that health authorities who buy such services have to pay 15% VAT, which clearly puts them at a disadvantage in terms of cost compared with direct labour. This, however, is Budget time and Mr Jenkin, a chancellor in waiting if ever there was one, has apparently floated the idea that there might be some change in the tax arrangements that would enable NHS authorities to take such services without incurring VAT. The unions are, of course, a stumbling block. But it is a condition of contract laid down by the DHSS that all staff employed by a contractor should be subject to the same terms and conditions as those prescribed by the Whitley Councils. Private contractors have moved into some hospitals and managed to overcome objections from NUPE and COHSE once it became clear no employee would suffer so far as his terms and conditions of employment were concerned. Perhaps the most that can be said is that Mr Jenkin is interested. But mighty oaks from little acorns grow and if there is one thing dear to the Conservative heart that is lacking in the NHS it is the profit motive.