Letter from Westminster

Tougher curbs on smoking

WILLIAM RUSSELL

The talks on a new voluntary code for cigarette advertising to take the place of the present agreement, which ends in

March, should be concluded early next month. The tobacco industry is due to give its response to the Government's proposals made before Christmas and it looks as if this time ministers are prepared to get tough if they do not get the response they want. At the inaugural meeting with the industry's representatives Mr Patrick Jenkin, Social Services Secretary, apparently made it clear that the Government wants the industry to cut its £80m a year promotional budget by half within

the next four years, to agree to tougher and regularly altered health warnings on packets, and to end cinema advertising and outdoor poster advertising.

Since then Sir George Young, one of the under secretaries at the DHSS, has been in charge of the negotiations. His record on preventive medicine and on smoking is generally held to be admirable. The industry is said to prefer the description "fanatical." But, while as a backbencher he could call for a ban on all cigarette advertising, office imposes restrictions on freedom of action, and Sir George's current task is to achieve the possible rather than the desirable. Also he is only a junior minister and the difficulty with smoking is that cigarettes are the end product of an industry which is the responsibility of a whole host of Government departments.

I am told that ministers want a voluntary agreement and so does the industry. Well, to paraphrase a famous remark, they would, wouldn't they. The Government prefers agreement because it does not want the bother of legislation, while the industry prefers the loophole-ridden voluntary system which has stood it in such good stead in the past. Contrary to popular belief there is no such thing as the voluntary code because no formal document has ever been drawn up. The rules governing the industry's practices are set out in a series of documents—a ministerial speech, a Commons answer, and various bits and pieces of the British Code of Advertising Practice.

The chances of legislation are remote: the timetable for 1980 is already overloaded. Nor is there much likelihood of time being given for the Bill to ban cigarette advertising introduced by Mrs Gwynneth Dunwoody, Labour MP for Crewe, who is chairman of the all-party backbench smoking and health group. The Government whips have objected each time it has come up for second reading—and will continue to do so. In Parliamentary politics the Government does not assist controversial bills introduced by opposition MPs—or, to put it another way, if there is any credit going governments take it.

Last time round much was made of the fact that the industry agreed to toughen up the wording of the health warning by conceding that smoking could "seriously damage" health. It is a pretty euphemistic warning given that 50 000 people die each year in England and Wales alone from smoking cigarettes, which is seven times more than are killed on the roads. The estimate is modest. ASH would put it at around 80 000. The Government wants a constantly changing health warning because familiarity has rendered the present slogan virtually invisible. It is simply

part of the packet design. Varied slogans would at least be read. Apparently it is ready to carry its toughness to the point of imposing a ban on cigarette advertising except at the point of sale. This is certainly a strong negotiating stance. The aim is also to do something about the way in which cigarette manufacturers have exploited sporting events through sponsorship to get the television exposure they are otherwise denied—all those banners round the edges of football grounds, athletic tracks, and ice rinks, for instance. The Government also wants to put a stop to the dodge by which a cigarette packet can appear in an advertisement for another kind of product altogether as part of the set dressing.

But until there is a minister at the DHSS with the weight and the will to carry the day against his colleagues—and I am not saying that he is not Mr Jenkin—things will probably go on much as they are with some kind of voluntary code. The industry is quite content with a divide and rule arrangement and to ensure this lasts it will make further "concessions." The industry will, however, probably have to face up to an attack on their product from another quarter this year since it seems certain that Sir Geoffrey Howe, Chancellor of the Exchequer, will put up cigarette duty in his next budget. It wasn't done last time and the duty is an enticing source of revenue—it brings in £2300m a year at present. Putting up the price, however, is not a solution to the problem since eventually people persuade themselves that they can afford to pay the new price after all—and in real terms they could pay more.

The vested interests against change—the tobacco industry apart—are powerful. The Department of Employment exists to create and preserve viable jobs and the industry provides work for 36 000 people, quite apart from the doctors, nurses, and undertakers who have to deal with the effects of the product. The Department of Industry has a vested interest in it to the tune of £30m spent since 1972 in grant aid, while the Department of Trade simply believes that trade as such is a good thing and the industry exports to 150 countries. The Ministry of Overseas Development gives aid to the tobacco industry in developing countries such as Malawi, Belize, and, possibly most important of all, Zambia, while the Common Market spends nearly £100m a year on subsidies to the tobacco farmers of France and Italy. Then there are the opera lovers, who get subsidised performances of the most expensive of the arts, one for which healthy lungs are essential, which is surely ironic, but no more so than is the sponsorship of athletics.

Sir George is on record as saying that if it can be made increasingly obvious that cigarette smoking is no longer normal behaviour it will do a great deal to persuade children—one-third of all adult smokers began before they were 9—not to take up the habit. He hopes that by the end of the century smoking will be "a habit indulged in by consenting adults in private." The alternative is horrific. Between now and the year 2000 half a million people will have been killed by cigarettes. Given that we have a Prime Minister who does not smoke and who does not allow her colleagues to do so in Cabinet, perhaps his hopes will be fulfilled. The talks currently under way in conditions of deepest secrecy at the behest of the industry seem to be going in the right direction.

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