

PRIME MINISTER

Seat Belts

PA - CF file

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MS
23/4/81 DM

There have been stories in the Press in the last couple of days that you have agreed to a free vote on compulsory seat belts, with the implication that the vote will happen quite soon.

I cannot trace the source of these stories, which to the best of my knowledge are wholly without foundation. The position is that the Transport Bill, which has been guillotined, has come out of Committee and is due for Report and Third Reading next week. As things stand, there will not be an opportunity for debate on Mr. Ennals' seat belt amendment at Report Stage because he was elbowed out of the way (literally!) by Sir Ronald Bell at the crucial moment at the end of the Committee Stage. Everyone expects that the House of Lords will carry an amendment making the wearing of seat belts compulsory, and both the DHSS and the Department of Transport are relaxed about leaving it to the House of Lords to do this. I think that the DHSS will ensure that the terms of the amendment are workable.

Cabinet will then have to decide how to handle the Lords amendment in the Commons. Health Ministers will want to vote in favour of it, and I suspect that Mr. Fowler will want to vote against it. You have committed the Government to allowing a free vote (see your letter of 23 February to Roger Moate - attached). The question which will arise in due course is, therefore, whether to allow the pay roll vote complete freedom on this issue. Although I suspect that your own sympathies may be against compulsory seat belts, I should think that the Cabinet itself may well be very considerably divided on the issue.

MS

6 April 1981