



From the  
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for Consumer Affairs

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Legis. Lecture Page*  
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MMC REPORT ON GAS APPLIANCES

I have seen Willie Whitelaw's memorandum of 21 September on the Queen's Speeches on the Prorogation and Opening of Parliament, which are to be discussed in Cabinet on 24 September; and I have also seen Janet Young's letter to Norman Fowler of 22 September on the role of legislation on local government finance in the legislative programme.

John Biffen is, as you know, out of the country; and I am deeply concerned that tomorrow's discussion will take place without him. I am perturbed, as I am sure he would be, by the proposal in Willie's memorandum canvassing the possibility of dropping legislation on gas appliance retailing from the programme. It is certainly not a proposal to which I could give agreement in his absence, given the major concession which he has already made in the case of the Insolvency Bill.

Nor, I must say, do I consider that it would be wise for colleagues to approve the proposal in any case. As you will know from our earlier discussions in E Committee, a great deal of importance attaches to this legislation if the Government's decision on the closure and disposal of the gas showrooms is to be implemented, and if the public's concern on safety is to be fully met. I believe that any departure now from our decision to introduce legislation would not only be interpreted as a sign that we were wavering in our intentions, but might also be seen as a withdrawal of our earlier assurance (which, with the agreement of colleagues, I renewed when I spoke to the National Gas Consumers' Council on 15 September) that legislation would be introduced if the Government considered it necessary to meet the public's apprehension about safety. I accordingly hope that colleagues will concur in retaining the proposed legislation in the programme, as we had earlier agreed.

To the extent that choices will have to be made, I recognise the force of the manpower implications of the local government legislation to which Janet Young has referred in her letter. But I would ask colleagues to consider two important features of the legislation on gas appliances in addition to those I have set out above. First, the longer it remains off the statute book, the longer we must defer

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the considerable Exchequer benefits accruing from the disposal of the showrooms. Secondly, I believe that if the concessions are made which I have outlined in my letter of today to Nigel Lawson the legislation may prove a good deal less controversial than anticipated, and benefit from an easier passage through the House.

I am copying this letter to members of the Cabinet.

Yours Ever  
Sally

SALLY OPPENHEIM

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