

Consultation or conflict

by Des McConaghy

As the Merseyside Task Force nears the end of its year, the issue for Mr Heseltine is still consultation or conflict as he continues to by-pass local councils and the people of Toxteth.

Mr Heseltine's major speech to the Liverpool Architects' Association on 24 May purported to be a comprehensive report of his first seven months on Merseyside. There appeared to be little structure in this interminable catalogue of *ad hoc* and disconnected ideas. Certainly it would be impossible to unscramble it all in any short review. In my opinion, however, it is important to note two important defects. The first is simple management failure: an apparent reluctance to study the best overall deployment of public resources across Merseyside. The second is rather more critical: his inability to reach and involve the people that matter.

His predecessors failed in much the same way and hence last year's riots. The harassment and exclusion from opportunities were just two very important factors. Even more critically, people in areas like Toxteth are excluded from the framework of political debate. As Martin Luther King once said, 'Riots are the voice of the unheard'. It is a point I tried to drive home last year: we are now a centralised state where local democracy has little real meaning—and none at all for the underprivileged.

What innovations are needed?

As unemployment gets worse and worse, it is therefore incredible that Mr Heseltine has continued to by-pass local democratic institutions and indeed placed greater burdens on them. Of course this general centralisation of power and this increasing exclusion of communities and constituencies has been happening for years. In any traditional sense it was all bound to continue and so our worst urban areas of greatest social disadvantage were, so to speak, programmed for riots. What innovations were needed to keep all such areas within a properly constituted framework for debate? That was always the question.



Grange Street and still toasting

Management failure

The management failure of omitting to study the overall deployment of public resources in Merseyside is perhaps more remarkable since this appears to be an obvious part of the brief announced by the Prime Minister on 9 October 1981. Nothing of the sort has really happened. The best summary view so far offered me about various Task Force initiatives has been one of 'a thousand flowers blooming'. Recently Mr Heseltine has put his official seal of approval on this 'piecemeal' approach since he prefers it to 'strategies that don't work'. In a sense I think this does represent a fairly honest recognition that he does not know what to do.

Basically, therefore, it is business as usual: a rash of environmental cosmetics almost regardless of revenue consequences and a big dose of capital for the proliferating array of quangos. Hordes of 'house trained' academics, solicitors and other Whitehall 'place-men' are now the unelected leaders of Merseyside. To put the best complexion on it, their interests are somewhat removed from the unemployed kids in Liverpool 8.

Just to drive this point home, it is worth noting that, in 1981/82, elected local authorities were responsible for less than a third of public expenditure in Merseyside. It is worth noting also that, if the overall resource exercises were done, Merseyside's 2.8% of the UK population might only be receiving 2.6% of UK public expenditure or, in any event, not

much more than national *per capita*. Since Social Security are mandatory payments across the country, it might be interesting to see how Merseyside fares in terms of *per capita* discretionary expenditure!

Meanwhile, very little has happened in the riot areas apart from schemes already planned by the local authorities. In as much as Heseltine's Task Force has stimulated councils into new activities, all are uncertain and correctly concerned about revenue consequences. Town Clerks may wish to respond positively but the Minister for Merseyside is simultaneously cutting their main municipal programmes to the bone. For example, one in five are now out of work in Merseyside but he has already cut Liverpool's Rate Support by £63m. This year Liverpool City will have to find £4.8m for Urban Programme loan charges alone. As opposed to this difficult world of revenue clawbacks, penalties and balanced budgets, profligate quangos escape accountable controls. This year the new Merseyside Development Corporation will have a budget of £24m. Much of this will be spent on the proposed riverside Garden Festival: a luxury at 75% more than normal costs since the Minister wants it by 1984.

Recently challenged about his failure to involve people in the riot areas, Heseltine suggested it was up to them to get involved in local government: 'There is a democratic process in this country, there are councillors, there is a city authority and it is elected' . . . 'that is the instrument of democratic power which has served this country. Why don't they play a part in that?' The answer is, of course, that both blacks and whites in Toxteth are the same as anywhere else: like Heseltine; they know that central government is the main spender and controller of appointed agencies in urban areas. All such figures exist and can be made intelligible to the mass of people; it would be an elementary cybernetic innovation for any Minister who really preferred consultation to bloody conflict.