
Editorial

Computers and Administration

Giving evidence to the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee last April, the Chairman of the Inland Revenue Board conceded that the backlog of work in his department had reached the point where £36m was owed in unpaid tax and that some tax inspectors had more than 600 letters more than two weeks old awaiting a reply. The PAC investigation followed a finding by the Comptroller and Auditor General that, by October 1985, there was a staggering backlog of 6.2 million unanswered letters in the department. The Thatcher Government's policy of cutting civil service numbers and squeezing pay has had a devastating effect on the efficiency of the Inland Revenue — which may be good news for the black economy but has alarming implications for public policy and the PSBR. A comparable malaise afflicts the DHSS, where demoralized and overworked staff in local offices, have vocally, and sometimes militantly, proclaimed their inability to cope with a rising tide of demand for benefits.

Perhaps in government, as in much of the private sector, the answer lies in the computer? The recent green paper on

The Reform of Personal Taxation (Cmnd 9756) underlines the extent to which complex public policies are increasingly computer-dependent. Major reforms to eliminate anomalies in tax laws as applied to married couples (reforms which all commentators agree are long overdue, even if they dispute the merits of what the Government is actually proposing) cannot be undertaken until the completion of computerisation at the Inland Revenue, which means, as the Chancellor admits, "that any change could not begin before 1990 at the earliest".

The continuing movement towards the computer age in administration, inevitable though it may be, has worrying implications. There are obvious parallels, as well as contrasts, to be drawn between the public sector and the private sector. The fact has to be faced — in Whitehall as in Wapping — that computerisation has major effects on the shape of the labour market. There are "civil libertarian" implications in the actual and potential facility for instant recall and cross-referencing of personal records. There is the fact that disgruntled unions can always (as the civil service unions did in 1981) mount an effective campaign of industrial action

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