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## Editorial

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### "Citizens' Charter"

The Government's Citizens' Charter, published – after much previous leakage – on 22 July (Cm 1599), has attracted very mixed responses. Scorn, predictably, from the Labour Party, whose own Charter was launched pre-emptively, a few weeks earlier. The Liberal Democrats complained that the package, which includes no constitutional reforms such as a Freedom of Information Act or a Bill of Rights, is about consumerism rather than citizenship. It has widely been noted that realisation of the Charter's objectives will not involve the commitment of extra public funds, which some critics see as signalling that the exercise is just pre-election window dressing. But the Government says, on the contrary, that it would not make sense to spend extra public money on policies, part of whose rationale is giving better value to the taxpayer.

At the heart of the Charter lie promises of greater sensitivity to customers' needs; of published performance targets and comprehensive information about standards achieved;

of more effective complaints procedures and better redress (including monetary compensation in appropriate cases) when things go wrong. The proposals embrace all parts of the public sector (including the police and the courts) and extend also to the privatised utilities, where the Government promises legislation to strengthen the powers of regulatory bodies such as OFTEL and OFGAS. There is to be a Charter Standard (and service providers which come up to the standard will be entitled to use a Chartermark), and a system of local lay adjudicators to deal with minor complaints. A Citizens' Charter Unit has been set up in the Cabinet Office to co-ordinate the whole project.

It is difficult to make judgments about a programme which is still in its formative stages, which is so diverse and which will take many years to reach fruition (assuming there is no change of Government after the next election). But it does underline some important trends in recent Government thinking, and it also highlights differences of emphasis between the two main political parties in the post-Thatcher era.

The conservatives under Mr Major remain committed to privatisation and

to compulsory competitive tendering (CCT); but their Charter implicitly acknowledges the continuing virtue of substantial public sector service provision – now to be increasingly exposed both to market forces and to the consumer orientated disciplines of the Charter. An article in the *Independent* quoted one cynical Conservative rightwinger's interpretation of the Charter as: "we can't in fact get rid of these things; but as we don't run them very effectively, we'll give you a fiver back when we fail." Labour has long abandoned any thoughts of wholesale re-nationalisation, though it is strongly opposed to CCT. Its Charter is about protecting the public sector from further erosion by making it more accountable and sensitive to its customers. Variations on these arcane theological themes will doubtless be the battle cries of the next election.