

Editorial

Deregulation and "Back to Basics"

The turbulence of the long 1992–93 parliamentary session – Maastricht, rail privatisation, *etc* – has predictably prompted the Government's business managers, with a dwindling majority, to opt for a quieter life this time around. Recent wounds are to be bathed in the anodyne balm of the Prime Minister's "back to basics" initiative. The Queen's Speech, delivered on 18 November, promised a comparatively modest crop of 13 "programme" Bills – mostly uncontroversial, but with some decidedly non-anodyne items among them, including increased contributions to the European Community/Union's budget (following the Edinburgh summit agreement), privatisation of British Coal and modification of the right to silence (opposed by Lord Runciman, among others).

"Legislation will be introduced to facilitate deregulation and to remove obstacles to contracting out in central and local government." Inspired by

"New Right" ideas and by more pragmatic concerns about inefficient management and overmanning in the public sector, and about high taxation and public borrowing, programmes for reducing both the size and the intrusiveness of the public sector and for squeezing more productivity and consumer-sensitivity out of what remains, have been pillars of government policy for the last fourteen years.

The civil service has been cut by twenty per cent since 1979 (and further cuts are likely in consequence of market testing); services have been privatised and contracted out in central and local government – to a point where the *raison d'être* of elected local government has diminished almost to vanishing point. Cutting public bureaucracy down to size (literally and metaphorically) and eliminating unnecessary red tape has, by and large, proved to be good politics. The centrality to government policy of the consumerist Citizen's Charter is reaffirmed in the Queen's Speech.

A deregulation Bill, to empower ministers to sweep away bureaucratic

impediments to the efficiency of small businesses is scheduled to be introduced next January. It has gained impetus from the continuing work of eight business task forces set up by the Department of Industry, which have already identified 3,500 regulations as strong candidates for review; and from the enthusiastic support of the employers' associations. Brussels will no doubt be watching the content and progress of the Bill very carefully; so too will numerous interest groups (including suspicious trade unions), preparing to lobby vigorously for their various causes and clienteles.

One constitutional aspect of the exercise will probably be of particular concern to the House of Lords – troubled perhaps by the shade of Lord Chief Justice Hewart – about the extensive rule-making (or unmaking) powers that the Bill will confer on ministers. Is the Henry VIII clause about to rear its ugly head once again, in yet another guise?

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