



## NOTES

### Road lobby rejoices

*Mick Hamer writes:* Transport minister Norman Fowler has hinted that he favours still heavier lorries on our roads. Announcing an inquiry into road freight last week he emphasised that he expected it to 'face squarely the issue of whether there should be any change in the present limits on maximum weight', despite the wide-ranging terms of reference, which were inherited from Labour and which asked for recommendations in the public interest. Additionally Fowler stressed the need for a report which was 'not unduly protracted', echoing the aspirations of the pro-lorry civil servants whose original (leaked) proposals for this inquiry aimed to restrict its scope and length.

Mr Fowler can certainly expect support from the road lobby. The Freight Transport Association and the Road Haulage Association have recently produced their case for the 40 tonne lorry, based on the argument that it will cut costs. Environmentalists and the TUC can be expected to take a different view. The environmentalists, as well as emphasising the environmental impact of heavy lorries, will dispute the operators' cost-cutting claims. Last week the leaders of the transport unions unanimously agreed to oppose heavier lorries and the TUC says such lorries reduce job opportunities.

Fowler has wasted little time in making clear his own sympathies on transport – a policy area polarised along non-party lines. (On one side are the environmentalists, the railway and waterway lobby; on the other, the road lobby.) So far Fowler has set in train events which could lead to heavier lorries, dropped Labour proposals to replace the £50 car duty by petrol tax and abandoned plans to make the wearing of seat belts compulsory. His decision on excise duty – whilst not entirely consistent with other Conservative fiscal policies – has pleased the road lobby and on seat belts he has sided with the

extreme case supported by the antedeluvian RAC. This activity suggests some clearly formed views on the part of Fowler, even though only one of these issues – the petrol tax – was mentioned in the campaign and none was thought noteworthy enough to rate a mention in the Tory manifesto.

### Heseltine's command

*Stephen Marks writes:* Labour council leaders have been quick to pledge opposition by all legal means to Tory plans to sell off council houses. But it is hard to see what leeway for legal opposition will be left them by the promised legislation. Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine has promised: 'My legislation will be watertight. There will not be one millimetre for local authorities to frustrate the right of the people to buy their homes'. He has in mind a procedure modelled on the Leasehold Reform Act, by which tenants would have the right to serve a statutory notice on the district valuer, requiring him to value their houses and calculate the appropriate level of mortgage repayment. Tenants would become mortgagors automatically on serving such notices. This has the advantage of making any confrontation appear to be between councils and would-be purchasers, not councils and the Government.

District valuers are appointed and paid by local authorities, but are required to carry out their functions in accordance with 'professional standards'. Any Labour council instructing its valuer not to proceed with valuations of council homes for sale could presumably be answered by a writ from the would-be purchaser requiring the valuer to comply with the law. Most valuers, respectable and highly-paid professionals that they are, would feel no qualms at disregarding their employers and falling in with Mr. Heseltine's legislation.

Labour councils could simply avoid making extra staff available for the work involved, and use other means to deale sales indefinitely; Mr. Heseltine has

already thought of this. A recent circular exhorted councils to 'give full consideration to the use of private legal, surveyor and other services to meet what may be a sudden and short-term upswing in the rate of sale of council dwellings'. This could provoke opposition from NALGO, which is strongly opposed to the use of outside professional staff – a sort of town hall 'lump'. But the legislation is likely to be framed insuch a way that NALGO members in legal and valuers departments will have to decide whether or not they want to break the law.

### Mirror's old technology

*Duncan Campbell writes:* The *Daily Mirror* group has, as expected, written off the ability of its 'new technology' computer typesetting and composition system to compose the group's five papers totally electronically. The *Mirror* and its companions will now be produced by allowing the computer to set the type only and then employing staff to paste the resulting text onto boards – so-called 'cut and paste' techniques. The decision, taken last week, follows a long crisis, caused by the failure of the computer system (NS 18 May).

The computer suppliers, the US based Linotype Paul, are still struggling to try and make additional equipment, for inserting pictures electronically, work as promised. They may also face a legal suit from the *Mirror*, because the performance has been so markedly below what was ordered.

The *Mirror* group will be facing heavy additional costs for some time to come, because of the need for some 60 or so additional staff to handle the variety of printing methods now in use. This is instead of a hoped-for reduction of 100. Nevertheless, the management still hope to achieve this employment target 'in the medium term', as the various newspapers, starting with the *Daily* and *Sunday Mirror*, convert to what might be called 'semi-new' (or semi-old?) technology.