EDITORIAL

August is a wicked month in which to compose an editorial. The institutions of the European Union are quiescent; UK parliamentarians are away from Westminster; the US Republican convention did indeed adopt Bob Dole as its presidential candidate but seemed to eschew policy and politics. However, students in South Korea are providing a major challenge on unification to a precarious government; Russia is in total disarray over Chechenia and Parliament House in Canberra has been invaded — and looted — by protesters against proposed cuts in public expenditure. At least, it is winter in Australia.

Two constitutional concerns are on the front page in Britain: the role of the monarchy and the issue of identity cards. The royal family is involved in strategic discussions about its own future, addressing such matters as financing its £50 million a year activities from Crown Estate revenues rather than from the Civil List and government department revenues, inheritance of the throne by the first-born irrespective of sex, disestablishment of the Church of England and abolition of the ban on heirs to the throne from marrying Catholics. This anticipatory strategy not only 'modernises' the monarchy but attempts to redress its tarnished reputation, as well as being a weapon against its outright abolition.

The debate about identity cards in the UK is well within the tradition of Whitehall farce. The core issue is clearly one of civil liberties, so the proposal is a bizarre compromise — a voluntary identity card. The nonsense, however, does not end there. The heated debate in the dog days of summer has focused on whether the card should display the union flag, the royal crest and/or the European Union flag. If it were to be combined with a driving licence.

Some rather more urgent and illuminating arguments are deployed in this issue of Policy and Politics, addressing the various interrelationships between the individual citizen, the state and non government organisations. Susan Smith examines the problem of discretion in effecting welfare transfers and concludes, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, that discretion is inevitable, necessary and often desirable, when assessing housing needs. The core implication of this conclusion is that a system of rigorous accountability on the part of those taking discretionary decisions is essential. Also in the housing policy field, David Clapham and his colleagues examine the community ownership scheme in Scotland against four different views of direct democracy. They conclude that the scheme has resulted in better service provision and has provided some limited democratic benefits. It is not, however, a form of privatisation nor is it a form of radical politics.

Marian Barnes and Alan Walker challenge the UK government's approach to the notions of user involvement and empowerment as shallow consumerism, and outline eight key principles by which the genuine empowerment of service users could be realised. These principles are grounded in a practical example. Lynne Russell, Duncan Scott and Paul Wilding offer a tight analysis of the implications of the changing funding profile of several voluntary bodies in the north of England. Statutory funding has become a higher proportion of total income, which has itself increased, and the costs of funding success are examined.

These four articles focus on Britain. The last two articles address the important influence of supranational institutions. Lynn lion scrutinises changes in the educational policies of the World Bank away from the productive purposes of education to policies aimed at sustaining stable environments in order to reflect the needs of the global economy. She highlights the linked and contradictory needs of a global market and those who live in dire poverty, and reflects on the possible consequences of this shift in World Bank education policy. Finally, Thomas Lawton explores the impact on European Union industrial policy of the close linkages between the European Commission and transnational corporations. He uses a 'pentagonal diplomacy' model and illustrates his argument from the electronics sector. The power of informal relationships between the Commission and a group of large firms is emphasised.

This editorial would not be complete without sincere thanks to Liz McCarty, Assistant Editor, who has been a great strength in the editorial team, not least to a relatively new editor. She is moving to the Crown Prosecution Service as a direct entrant to the public service. We wish her well in her new career.

Randall Smith