

A TIME TO LOOK BACK IN ANGER



NO bouquets, no flowers. I simply stood in the Market Square and took a deep breath. It's not the clearest mountain air you'll ever come across, but it's home. Home from the crazy world of arcane rules and all-night sittings. Parliament has taken a break.

A year ago, I stood on the same spot, celebrating Labour's victory in Nottingham South at the General Election, and wondering what it was all going to mean. I hadn't anticipated that pit closures, Vat on fuel, and "Black Wednesday" were all going to pour out of die Government's first year in office. Standing in the square was an anniversary, not a celebration. There is not a lot that Nottingham has to cheer about from this year. Business is in die doldrums and will soon face die added problems from die collapse of die mining base in die county. 2317 families in Notts faced housing repossession orders in die last year, while only 216 new properties for rent were completed

by local councils or housing associations. It coincided with worrying levels of inactivity in the building industry and record housing waiting lists.

EXCITING ideas, (still being produced within the City and County Councils) began to grind to a halt City Challenge, die centrepiece of admirable ambition to bring jobs and opportunities to inner city residents, has become bogged down because die partnership with business has simply not delivered. Boots' "dream development" on die Island site has dwindled to little more than a wheelie-bin with windows and even this seems to have been deferred. So what good news do I bring.

Well, Norman Lamont has been able to sort out some problems - mainly those he was having with one of his tenants — and be thanks die taxpayers for their assistance. So, too, does Mr Gummer for die pond that we kindly put in his garden. In a bold and decisive move we left die ERM, after throwing £10bn at international currency speculators by pretending we were staying in.

I have yet to see any sign of "safe hands" in die governance of this country. For all John Major's huffing and puffing, you can still probably get better odds on the Grand National starting this year man die economy. And this is what leaves me most angered at die end of my first year in Parliament. It isn't helped by my deep suspicion of die institution itself - a facade democracy where ministers have been able to run off with decision-making powers which Parliament can no longer control or constrain.

Parliament works like a public school and behaves no better. It offers you privileges because most of all it wants you to be part of die club. For my part I'd like to hand "die club" over to London's homeless and build a modem Parliament somewhere civilised - like Leeds or Sheffield, Manchester or (on, all right tHen) Nottingham. I'd love to break the link between the barristers' chambers, the Stock Exchange and die House of Commons - where too many MPs still do their private work during die day and stroll into Parliament for die evening's entertainment.

I'd like to see a Parliament where an MP's salary was their working wage, not a cherry on the cake of

company directorships. I'd like a system where Labour, in opposition, simply understood that its job was to offer a vision of something radically different - not entering into behind-the-scenes deals (over Maas-tricht) to make sure that die Government was never defeated.

BACK in the real world this week - at public meetings, visiting sheltered housing schemes, community projects and local businesses - I find it exhilarating to be reminded that there is a desperate longing for change; that people have their own ideas about how we can rebuild our way out of die mess we have created; that there is not a public opposition to paying more if we can see a way forward. The hostility is to the notion of paying more to get less.

The Evening Post challenges us with the call to "wake up Nottingham!" It may well be right to do so, but if there is to be an unleashing of ideas which could spin us optimistically towards the next century, then the resources to back the ideas must also be available. That is surely the lesson from City Challenge.

For this another, more demanding challenge might be needed - "Wake up Britain ... Nottingham is waiting!" It needs Parliament to be grabbed by the scruff of the neck and shaken into this century, and Government to come up with something more useful for this city to work with than Glimmer's pond and Lament's lodger.