

PATHFINDER FOR A YOUNG PRETENDER

Mr Edward Heath is an elder statesman who sounds too often like an aspiring politician. He deals frequently at an appropriate level of high seriousness with the great national and international issues that ought to be pre-occupying our own and other governments. His attachment to the European Community has been admirably forthright and unwavering. His concern for the problems of the Third World has been displayed not only in his membership of the Brandt Commission but also in the tenacity with which he has continued to press recommendations upon governments and public opinion. In his analysis of Britain's economic ills he has much of value to offer on terms both of critical comment and constructive suggestion, as he demonstrated in his devastating speech to Conservative students at Manchester yesterday. Of all the Conservative voices that are warning against reliance upon rigid monetarist doctrines his is the most weighty.

Yet it is not the most dangerous voice that will come to Mrs Thatcher's ears because, although it may be the statesman who is speaking, it is the politician who is heard. That is certainly the case within his own party. In the country at large he may well have preserved his credit to a greater extent. But in

Conservative circles his words are largely discounted as the expression of personal frustration at his exclusion from power.

Whereas Lord Home earned a special place for himself in the affections of the Conservative Party by the readiness and loyalty with which he served under his successor as party leader, Mr Heath has never been forgiven for refusing to join Mrs Thatcher's team. From time to time there have been token reconciliations in public. Sometimes it has seemed that a reconciliation of substance, even perhaps some kind of partnership, might develop. But these hopes have always been dashed. The policy differences have been too great and the philosophies of leadership too dissimilar. Mr Heath's hymn to "consensus" last night provoked, even before it was uttered, Mrs Thatcher's blistering retort from the antipodes.

Mr Heath has never seemed fully to accept Mrs Thatcher as leader of the party, and she cannot fairly be blamed for failing to offer him a post in her Cabinet after she won the last election. Had she included him her administration would have been even more divided than it has been. The relationship would quite simply not have worked.

But because everyone knows that it would not have worked, and that Mr Heath

cannot therefore reasonably expect to hold high office again so long as Mrs Thatcher remains the Conservative leader, there is an understandable tendency within the party to assume that his criticisms of policy are motivated by personal calculation. It is widely believed that while he may speak as an elder statesman he is not content with that role. So whenever he launches an attack upon the government, no matter how formidably reasoned it may be, there is an inclination among Conservatives to respond: "Well, he would say that wouldn't he?"

This means that Mr Heath is not the person best placed to lead a rebellion against Mrs Thatcher. But the substance of his criticism may nonetheless undermine confidence in her policies. He is expressing anxieties which are shared by many others who are known to be more disinterested. This time the Conservative reflex which brands him as disloyal will be struggling with a growing suspicion in some of the same minds that he is saying exactly what needs to be said. Mrs Thatcher may be able to shrug off his attack, but that will not dispose of the anxieties. What she has to fear is not defeat by Mr Heath in single combat, but that others will use the weapons he is fashioning to greater political effect.