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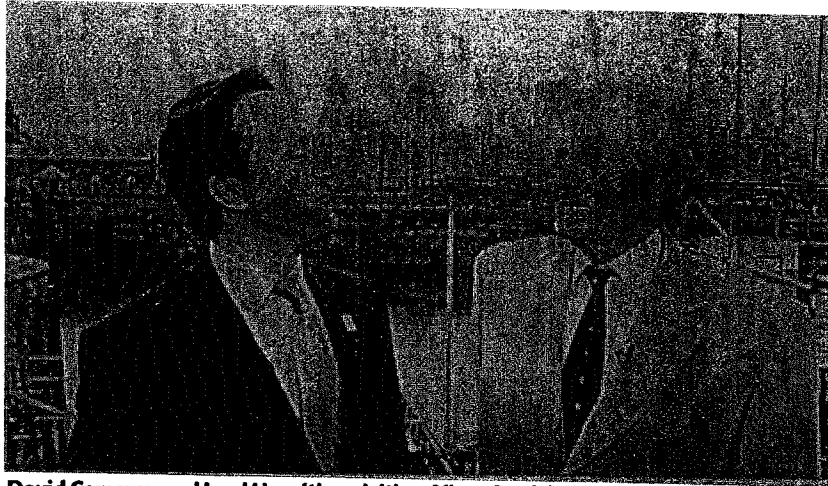
* Miliband hails end of Britain's urban decline as Tories focus on inner cities

By Andy McSmith

The flight of the middle class from British cities has been halted, a new government report shows, but the average British city still lags behind the best in Europe or the US as a place to live or do business.

The first *State of the Cities* report, published today, is billed as the biggest study into the quality of urban life in England. The brainchild of the Cabinet's rising star, David Miliband, it copies an exercise begun in the US by Bill Clinton, who commissioned annual "state of the cities" reports to focus attention on tackling urban deprivation and decay. That idea was dropped by President George Bush, but it has been taken up by other governments, including South Africa's.

The publication follows hard on the heels of an initiative by the Tory leader, David Cameron, who wants to recover some of the support his party has lost in urban areas. Yesterday, his entire Shadow Cabinet assembled for a meeting in Liverpool, which has be-



David Cameron and Lord Heseltine visiting Albert Dock in Liverpool yesterday PA

come almost a no-go area for Tories since the 1980s.

Mr Miliband's report focuses on the 56 largest urban areas in England. The report will show that nearly two-thirds of new jobs created since 1997 were created in the cities. It will also show that 42 per cent of England's population growth during 1997-2003 was concentrated in those 56 cities.

Mr Miliband believes that the figures put paid to the idea that English cities are in chronic decline.

"Twenty years ago, we'd only have been talking about problems," he said. "Now our cities are places of real economic dynamism, but also of poverty. We've made huge strides in the past 10-20 years, but we lag behind the European and US leaders when it comes to quality of the environment, quality of life and in some aspects the quality of the economy."

Mr Cameron had a packed day of visits in Liverpool, accompanied by the

former deputy prime Minister Michael Heseltine, who has been brought out of semi-retirement to head the Tories' new City Task Force. It included the weekly meeting of the Shadow Cabinet, held in Albert Dock, which was renewed in the 1980s under Mr Heseltine's aegis.

"We already run local authorities in urban areas such as Trafford, Coventry, Bradford and London, and I now want to step up the pace with a new policy focus on our cities," Mr Cameron said.