

## My kind of town, by GLC man in Havana

From Lionel Martin in Havana

HOSPITALS and schools in Cuba give a better service than those in Britain, Mr Ken Livingstone, the leader of the Greater London Council, said yesterday during his two-week visit to the Caribbean island.

"As you walk around the streets of Havana it is quite obvious that the average person here is healthier than the average person in Britain and is getting a better education and better health care."

He told the Guardian: "I think if you brought people from London, Manchester and Glasgow, they would be stunned, given what they would expect to find in the sense of what they see on the television screens about the Third World.

"Here there seems to be a lot of basic contentment simply because what little there is, is adequately shared around and those tremendous inequalities one finds in other Third World nations are simply not here."

After receiving a gold medal as an illustrious guest of the city of Havana, he said he was impressed by the optimistic mood and confidence of the Cuban people.

"It is really a quite remarkable and very pleasant society," he said. "I am struck by the lack of materialism and the fact that increasingly people are talking in terms of what they do for each other and for the country as a whole.

"I find that such an attractive change from the sort of individualism which I think so many people really get caught up in and find so unfulfilling as a way of life. Here there is such a boundless enthusiasm."

He also saw a lesson for a future Labour government on how to cope with pressure from the United States if it tried to prevent nuclear disarmament.

"You can come to Cuba and see a nation of just a fifth the population of Britain, formerly more dependent on the US in terms of its economy, that has been able to resist American pressure for 25 years to produce a society that I find very attractive indeed," Mr Livingstone said.

"It gives me a lot of encouragement that if we can elect a Labour government in Britain that has the will to stand up to the Americans we will be able to do it.

He recognised that the country fell into the Russian orbit but he saw no evidence of Soviet control "What I think strikes me in comparison with those Third World countries that are in the American orbit is that the strings are much, much less here."

He had found striking similarities between London and Havana in terms of the daily problems being faced with residents reporting the same difficulties to their local councils. But he also found an interesting departure. "In Cuba they have only just started to build a local government structure over the last 10 years or so—before that it was very centralised state—and there is much enthusiasm here. In Britain our local governments are being deprived of their historic authority."