

Conservatives on course for majority in Greek election

From John Carr
in Athens

GREECE'S conservative New Democracy Party appeared to be on course for a narrow victory in yesterday's national elections, riding a wave of discontent over the Government's health and welfare policies.

New Democracy appeared set to earn a minimum of 156 seats in the country's 300-seat parliament. Supporters of Costas Karamanlis, the party leader, shouted "Your hour has come" as he entered his headquarters after voting. Mr Karamanlis, whose uncle was the architect of Greek membership in the European Union, said he was confident of victory.

Out of power for 16 of the past 20 years, New Democracy has returned from the political wilderness by attacking alleged corruption in the civil service and health and education woes. New Democracy was last night believed to be ahead in the provinces and even parts of traditional Socialist strongholds such as Crete.

Costas Simitis, the Socialist Prime Minister, is defending four years of solid economic achievement, such as reducing inflation to one-sixth of its 1996 level and preparing Greece for membership of the single currency.

The campaign was relatively civilised by Greek standards, with candidates shunning the invective and personal attacks characteristic of past elections. "The campaign was a European-style one, in which restraint prevailed," said Constantine Stephanopoulos, the President.
