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# 1997: Owen predicts easy agreement

By WALTER CHEUNG

The former British Foreign Secretary, Dr David Owen, yesterday expressed confidence that Britain and China will "easily" reach agreement on the future of Hongkong.

But Dr Owen, the foreign affairs spokesman for the Social Democratic Party, warned that we should not expect the British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, to complete her forthcoming visit to China with a solution to Hongkong's future.

"It would be silly for people of Hongkong to think that she will come back waving a piece of paper solving all your problems.

"What I think she can, and hopefully will do, is to make it easier to achieve the long-term solution," he said.

Dr Owen, an MP, described the visit as an important stage in the development of the dialogue on Hongkong's future and part of a continuous process.

He said the dialogue started during his term as Foreign Secretary when Lord Mac-

Lehose visited China.

"I am quite convinced that it will be possible for the United Kingdom and China and Hongkong to come to an understanding and reach agreement on the long-term future of Hongkong.

"It will be easy... because it is in the interest of all to reach.

"Agreements are successful when there is a common interest," Dr Owen said.

The common interest in this case is that Hongkong should "remain a thriving and prosperous community.

"I am sure we'll reach an agreement which will satisfy all the needs and above all sustain confidence," he said.

Dr Owen envisaged a very difficult world economy this decade.

"I am sure Hongkong can go through the 80s successfully provided confidence is maintained.

"This is something in the interest of China, Britain and Hongkong," Dr Owen said in a 20-minute press conference at the airport.

Dr Owen noted that Hongkong has gone through

previous downturns in the world economy "strikingly successfully."

Also chairman of the SDP's international policy committee, Dr Owen said each side should understand that minor changes in the Hongkong system can upset confidence if done in the wrong way.

On the attitudes during negotiations, Dr Owen said: "We must listen to their (Chinese) views and I know they will be prepared to listen."

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## Solution to 1997 will be easy, says Owen

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He said he decided not to go through all the different negotiating options.

"That is a matter for the Government to do," he said.

There is a great deal of scope for a negotiation and "I don't want to close any of the options."

He said sovereignty should not be used as a barrier towards a solution.

Speaking at the end of his three-day private visit before leaving for Singapore, Dr Owen said there has been a lot of speculation on Hongkong's future and "a bit too much."

There are cases where it will be helpful to have quiet diplomacy, Dr Owen said, "because each side needs to be able to accommodate the view of the others."

"There are dangers of setting concrete propositions which may not meet the feelings and interests of the others," Dr Owen said.

Dr Owen said when he was Foreign Secretary, between 1977 and 1979, China had not formulated a very definite view on Hongkong's future but now it has a clearer view.

Dr Owen said he would advise people not to use such terms as "sovereignty" or "self-determination" because they are terms that have meanings in other international negotiations.

"I think Hongkong is unique and I think it is advisable to talk about the interests of Hongkong... effective administration," he said.

On relationships between

the two countries, Dr Owen said Britain has demonstrated that it sees that China poses no military threat and that it is possible for both sides to discuss sales of military equipment.

"What we want are equal relations, a genuine partnership, and friendship.

"It is on that basis that we will resolve the long-term future of Hongkong to the satisfaction of all concerned," he said.

Dr Owen stressed that there is no parallel between the Falkland Islands and Hongkong.

Dr Owen, a founder-member of the SDP, said the dominant view of all British parties is to take account of the interests of Hongkong.

He said it is good that the Governor, Sir Edward Youde, is taking five Hongkong people to London with him to present local views in talks with Mrs Thatcher.

One of the aims of his visit, he said, was to meet those members of his party living here and to listen to their views on Hongkong's future.

On the passport issue, Dr Owen said his party is opposed to the change.

"It is difficult to tell what we can do about the Nationality Bill.

"We'll have a look at it when we come to power," said Dr Owen.

He did not believe the Bill would make any really substantive change in the position of Hongkong people.

"It was seen more as a slight and quite an unnecessary slight," he said.

While discussions on the way in which the new documents are quoted is still under discussion, Britain should listen hard to the views of Hongkong people.

He said the way it is actually written and how the word British appears on the documentation could make some difference and could help ease some of the slight people felt.

Dr Owen said his party is opposed to the increase in student fees for Hongkong students.

He declined to comment on Hongkong's contribution to the South Atlantic Fund.

On Hongkong's internal administration, Dr Owen said he would like to see more colonial trappings vanish.

"I think there are a lot of changes that could slowly be made to make Hongkong different from a colony," he said.

There is more and more self-government within the colonial legislation.