

# 1997 on British MPs' agenda

by  
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in London

PARLIAMENTARY pressure is growing for the terms of transfer of sovereignty and administration of Hongkong to China to be embodied in a new Sino-British treaty. This treaty would be submitted to the House of Commons for its approval without amendment.

Such a precedent exists in the transfer of sovereignty over Canada from Britain to the Canadians in an Act of Parliament in 1982.

The Chinese government is believed to have expected that Parliament would annul the Treaty of Nanjing and it is understood that they are reluctant to have the terms of a Sino-British agreement on HK's transfer and future administration explicitly set out in a constitutional document.

British ministers have stressed to China that Westminster will not accept any agreement not fully debated by both Houses of Parliament and Mrs Thatcher has stated several times that such an agreement would have to be acceptable to the British Parliament.

In fact, since in international law, Hongkong Island and Kowloon are recognised as sovereign British territory, their transfer to China needs parliamentary sanction to be valid.

MPs expect to hear a statement from Sir Geoffrey Howe, the Foreign Secretary about his recent trip when parliament returns for business on Wednesday, although the Libyan embassy siege in London may affect his timetable.

A Commons debate on Hongkong will be held in the next few weeks. The Labour party and the SDP-Liberal alliance are expected to give the government general support.

Although the British press has mainly shown guarded approval for the low-key arrangements for Sir Geoffrey's statement in Hongkong last Friday, Simon Winchester writing for the *Sunday Times* described the press conference in the Legislative chamber as "a colourless, odourless affair of jargon, condescension and obfuscation. Barely a question was answered, barely a fact vouchsafed. There was only one sure admission: From the morning of July 7, 1997 administration of the colony will not be British in any shape or form."

The *Sunday Times* also berated British officials' treatment of the Hongkong media. When Sir Geoffrey arrived in Beijing, Simon Winchester said, "reporters from Hongkong, coralled behind an airport rope, were pointedly ignored by the grey-suited retinue from London."

"For each meeting of the principals in the various great halls and guesthouses and embassies — in contrast to the disregard for the Hongkong journalists — lengthy briefings were offered to the men from the British press."

"At first they were well attended, until their stupefying lack of news became apparent and someone discovered Elizabeth Taylor trying to use a credit card in the local friendship store."

He adds: "The Hongkong reporters had to be content with only three-minute briefings and were invariably denied documents given to the British press... as witness the cautionary advice accompanying handout of a somewhat less than gripping central Office of Information interview with Howe 'don't say a word about this to that mob from Hongkong.'"

"There seemed no logic to this poor treatment, only malice," Simon Winchester concludes.