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# 1997 Bill will be high on agenda

From MICHAEL CHUGANI

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A new Bill formally decolonising Hongkong will be one of the major issues facing members when parliament returns after the Christmas break.

The British Government is giving the Hongkong decolonising bill top priority, bearing in mind there are only six months before the deadline for ratification of the agreement with China.

The MPs return on January 9 and officials say parliament will have to tackle the Hongkong issue again fairly quickly, this time in much greater detail.

Although both houses of parliament have already overwhelmingly approved the Sino-British accord handing Hongkong back to China in 1997, they still have to pass laws giving the pact legislative effect.

Unlike last month's parliamentary debate on the agreement itself, the coming debates on the Hongkong Bill are expected to be more detailed and possibly controversial.

The debate will give both MPs and peers a chance to examine how Mrs Margaret Thatcher's Government intends to legally solve the controversial British nationality issue for British Dependent Territory Citizens, among others.

Officials pointed out today that unlike the one-day debate on the agreement, the Hongkong Bill will have to go through all the necessary stages in both houses, like any other law.

This means there will have to be first, second and third readings, giving MPs a chance to question every aspect of the Bill including the sensitive area requiring changes to the controversial Nationality Act of 1981.

The Bill will have to go through the same procedure in the House of Lords where the Nationality Act was given a rough ride by the peers who forced the Government to make changes on the citizenship rights for Gibraltar.

Although parliament is expected to pass the Bill eventually, the Government will be subjected to tough questions on many issues, including conscription for Hongkong people; as well as right of abode in Britain for civil servants holding sensitive jobs in Hongkong.

The Prime Minister has, meanwhile, come under strong attack over her Christmas message to the Falkland Islanders, in which she said the wishes of the people there must be paramount.

Labour MP Mr Tam Dalyell accused her of double standards in her treatment of the Falkland islanders, when compared to the people of Hongkong and Gibraltar.

In a letter to Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe, Mr Dalyell said: "The contrast is stark in her dealing with Mr Felipe Gonzalez, the Spanish Prime Minister, over Gibraltar and with Mr Deng Xiaoping of China over Hongkong, and her treatment of President Alfonsin of Argentina."

Mr Dalyell's letter said the Prime Minister's Christmas message to the Falkland Islanders was provocative in timing, tone and content.