

THE pendulum of political fortune can swing fast in Britain. Before the Falklands crisis erupted two months ago, the year-old centrist Social Democratic-Liberal Party alliance was riding high in the popularity stakes.

For several months before the crisis, it seemed entirely feasible that the alliance would win the next general election.

That was at a time when grave doubts were being cast on the Conservative Government's economic strategy. And the Labour Party was beset by continuing ideological rifts.

But support in opinion polls for the Social Democratic Party — born in March last year out of the left-versus-right power struggle within the Labour Party — fell from 50.5 per cent in December to about 20 per cent by the middle of last month.

Doubtless, the advance of the alliance as a major political force to shatter Britain's long-established two-party system has been halted — at least temporarily — by the largely popular way in which Mrs Margaret Thatcher's Government has been handling the Falklands crisis.

Indications are that the Tories would win another term if a general election were held now. Mrs Thatcher is bound by law to call an election by mid-1984.

The SDP-Liberal alliance's best hope of winning the next general election lies in further disintegration of the Labour Party and failure of the Government's economic strategy.

Should the economic outlook improve, however, and there is no major disaster on the Falklands front, the best the alliance could hope for is a sizeable presence in a Parliament where no party has an overall majority.

In all circumstances, the alliance, particularly through its SDP component, is expected to become an influential power bloc. The question is how soon.

It is, therefore, of interest to find out how Hongkong stands vis-a-vis the alliance.

During my recent visit to London, I sampled the views of three senior members of the alliance.

They are the SDP's foreign affairs spokesman, Dr David Owen, who is opposing Mr Roy Jenkins in the contest for the party's leadership; the SDP's industry spokesman, Mr Ian Wrigglesworth, who is also the vice-chairman of the All-Party British-Hongkong Parliamentary Group; and the Liberal Party's foreign affairs spokesman, Mr Russell Johnston.

Dr Owen's views were contained in a report I sent from London early last month. But the inclusion of a summary of what he had said in this column will be helpful in painting an overall picture.

As Foreign Secretary in the last Labour Government, Dr Owen was closely involved with matters pertaining to Hongkong.

Alliance takes keen interest in our future

Handwritten notes: "The Alliance" and "2 June 1983"

S. A. M. S.

7 June 1992

He said the SDP's commitment to Hongkong will be as resolute and determined as its commitment to the Falklands — in the political context, rather than in the military sense.

He does not believe that there is any question of a military threat to Hongkong.

Dr Owen said: "The essence of British commitment to Hongkong is its readiness to play a role in Southeast Asia.

"Historically and accidentally, Hongkong has given us a unique opportunity to retain an interest in the region.

"Financially, politically and economically, almost everyone believes that it is to the interest of everyone that Hongkong should remain very much as it is.

"It's one of those rare occasions where there is a consensus for a status quo as far as Hongkong is concerned."

Dr Owen advised Hongkong people to stop asking questions about the expiry of the New Territories lease in 1997.

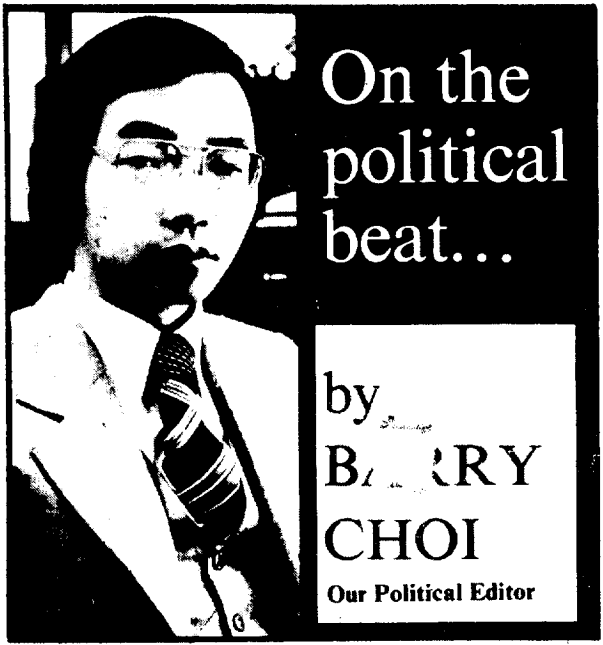
"The way to do this is to avoid making an issue of 1997. You have got to have a very great measure of self-discipline to ensure that the 1997 lease is not made a threshold.

"Hongkong should now deliberately defuse the significance of 1997; project forward beyond 1997 and assume that the status quo will continue after that date. The strategy should be to circumnavigate 1997.

"I am quite convinced that it will be possible to build a framework of trust and understanding so that the status quo will continue," he said.

Dr Owen believes that the British Government will not initiate formal talks about the New Territories lease — it will try to avoid elevating the issue.

On Hongkong's welfare, he said his party will try to influence moves to improve



social conditions, while fully recognising that much of the decision-making process concerned will be the responsibility of the Hongkong Government.

The best thing the British Government can do for Hongkong, he said, is to give it a good Governor.

Mr Wrigglesworth is a member of the SDP's National Steering Committee.

And, as vice-chairman of the All-Party British-Hongkong Parliamentary Group, he is among those who are better informed about Hongkong affairs.

He described the SDP as an "internationalist" party, in the sense that it is led by people experienced in international affairs, such as Dr Owen and Mr Jenkins.

Mr Wrigglesworth said: "We have a substantial body of the party leadership in Parliament who have in the past shown their support for Hongkong."

"My view is that the SDP will want to sustain Hongkong's present status and will

want to have the closest relationship with China, friendly and close relations with the Hongkong Government, Umelco and other representative bodies such as Urbco.

"They (SDP) won't want to in any way disturb the present position in Hongkong. I think they will want to seek as satisfactory a resolution of the 1997 issue as soon as possible.

"This is becoming a dominant issue in people's minds. We should want to protect the rights and interests of Hongkong people.

"If we win the next general election, I think we should seek to reach agreement with China which will give future security for Hongkong people.

"My personal view is that we should do all we can to encourage Hongkong's interests in Guangdong province.

"Likewise we should also encourage the Chinese Government to make increasing use of Hongkong."

Mr Wrigglesworth said the closer and more successful the joint enterprises are, the

easier it will be for both Hongkong and China to reach agreement on their future relationship and provide a long-term arrangement which will be of enormous benefit to China and Hongkong.

"I will be quite happy to see British administration in Hongkong after 1997, if that's what Hongkong people want and if that's the basis for sustaining good relations.

"I see no evidence that China, Britain and Hongkong want Britain to give up Hongkong. And as long as that's the case, this position should not be disturbed," he said.

For his part, the Liberal Party's foreign affairs spokesman, Mr Johnston, said of the British-Hongkong connection:

"There is no doubt at all that Britain has responsibility for Hongkong and thus the responsibility for negotiating the territory's future with China, to ensure as far as it can a stable future for Hongkong."

"One would wish to negotiate with China well before 1997. I think that some form of extension of the New Territories lease could be negotiated.

"We might have to have talks on the sovereignty of Hongkong Island. One would certainly want to try and reach with China an agreement reflecting the wishes of Hongkong people."

"The Chinese may well be content in letting the present situation continue as Hongkong is of considerable economic value to China."

Mr Johnston said in negotiating with the Chinese, any British Government would hope to enter these negotiations with some confidence that a reasonable agreement could be reached.

"I think the initiative will certainly come from Britain — if we want to extend the lease, we must take the initiative to start talks with China.

"We recognise that we have continued to be in Hongkong by grace and favour of

the Chinese.

"The maintenance of the status quo in Hongkong may be regarded as mutually beneficial — but we are in no position to dictate to the Chinese," he said.

Mr Johnston said he would agree that negotiations should start in the next year or two.

If no decision is reached soon, he said Hongkong's economy may start to deteriorate to no one's advantage.

Mr Johnston observed that there is not yet an "alliance" between his party and the Social Democrats in the foreign policy field because the partnership is still in its early stage.

But he was quick to point out that "we are likely to make a similar response."

He called for stronger economic links between Britain and Hongkong and greater political and cultural contact.

The views quoted above amply demonstrate broad support for Hongkong from the Social Democratic-Liberal Party alliance.

There is consensus over Britain's responsibility towards Hongkong.

The main difference between Dr Owen, Mr Wrigglesworth and Mr Johnston seems to be over whether Britain should initiate negotiations with China about Hongkong's future and if so, the timing of such negotiations.

Since it was formed, the SDP has attracted about 80,000 members, 29 of whom are Members of Parliament.

At the very least, the Social Democrats in alliance with the Liberals can hope to become a major force in British politics.

And it is heartening for Hongkong to have friends in the ranks of this alliance.