

1997 — and all that!

NO Chinese leader is ever likely directly to be asked to give Hongkong an assurance about the continuity of its status — either before or after 1997.

The reason seems to us fairly obvious.

We could be asking that leader to commit political suicide — something he might expect from his enemies but hardly his friends.

Proposals about 1997 tacit understandings seem to us to be about equally dangerous.

Besides, they smell of coming from lesser mortals.

We see no reason why such people in our midst should do any wringing of their hands, nor indulge in any weak wishful thinking, as a result of what our Chief Secretary, Sir Denys Roberts, is reported so carefully to have said last week in New York.

The facts are Hongkong could not work as it does now, and be useful to China as it is now, if some tacit agreement were worked out now for us to accept some lesser status after 1997.

We would have to be fools not to understand a lesser status later would have to be discounted now and that any benefits both to Peking and ourselves would therefore be illusionary by 1997.

However, our problem now in Hongkong is hardly anything to do with that dubious hypothesis.

It is something we may find just as distastefully insidious as 1997 comes closer.

It will be to stop the uncertainty about our future from becoming a dry rot that might end like Shanghai in 1949 — or like Saigon much more recently.

Of course, there cannot be a definitive scenario now about the years leading up to 1997.

Our Governor, in a recent speech, painted a picture of what he foresaw agreeably up to 1983.

That's about the time zero population growth could be attained and our programmes for adequate social services reach full fruition.

Presumably from 1984, like Jonathan Livingstone Seagull, we shall socially at least then go into some blissful glide that might still the tart tongue of even our Mrs Elsie Elliott.

That is, until public revenues start drying up and new generations find employment harder to obtain because investment in Hongkong by then would have begun also to dry up and the economic growth rate to decline.

Well, that is, unless by about 1989 we do have a Water and Power Authority (and a lot of other corporations in the public sector like that) willing to invest and take the risks of amortisation from private enterprise.

Yet oddly, our Chief Secretary said nothing about that possibility. Now did he?