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1997 updates win for lobby

From DAVID HEALY

London, Feb 7. The effectiveness of the lobbying by Umelco and others in Hongkong has now been demonstrated by the major concessions in the Hongkong Bill announced by the Foreign Office minister, Mr Richard Luce, in the House of Commons today.

Mr Luce made clear the British Government's desire to accommodate the anxieties of the people of Hongkong expressed through Umelco and the Labour Party as well as some of their own back-benchers in parliament.

The main concession announced as the Bill completed all its House of Commons stages was the granting of an annual report and debate in parliament on progress in Hongkong between now and 1997.

But the whole tenor of Mr Luce's speeches during the four-hour process showed the Government is keen to appear ready to listen to all sides between now and the Bill's royal assent before Easter.

Up to 50 MPs were in the chamber during the debate at

one time and although Mr Luce was in charge of the operation for the Government, the Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, joined him on the Government frontbench for some of the proceedings.

The Defence Secretary, Mr Michael Heseltine, and the Immigration Minister, Mr David Waddington, also spent some time on the frontbench beside Mr Luce, though none of them spoke.

The Labour Party's foreign affairs spokesman, Mr George Robertson, who led for the opposition, had pressed for the annual report and asked Mr Luce to take account of the views calling for this on all sides.

The debate began much later than expected because of the pressure of earlier parliamentary business and it ran on into the early hours.

Afterwards, Mr Robertson said: "We are pleased with the concessions we have been given by the Government."

He paid tribute to the work of Umelco and listed the concessions which the Government had made:

• More time between the second reading and the committee stage to allow consultations.

• The annual report and debate.

• The new nationality status written into the Bill.

• Full parliamentary debates on amendable Orders-in-Council on the nationality issue.

Mr Robertson said: "I think we have given long and detailed consideration reflecting the worries and anxieties, but also the hopes, of the people of Hongkong."

"There will be no complacency and no lack of vigilance on our part. Once again, I think the British parliament has discharged its obligation to the people on the other side of the world."

The new Hongkong Commissioner in London, Mr Colvyn Haye, who sat in the gallery throughout the debate, said: "I think Umelco will be very happy. I myself am very pleased with the outcome."

"It will be interesting to see what Umelco says, but I think all their fears and concerns have been adequately covered."

"I hope the message from Hongkong will be: 'Thank you very much everybody.'"

Mr Haye warmly congratulated Mr Robertson outside the chamber after the four-hour debate on his handling of the Bill.

The Hongkong Bill was given a formal first reading in the House of Lords tonight with no debate or discussion and will receive a second reading and debate on February 19, thus underlining the Government's determination to maintain the rapid pace on the measure.

Several Hongkong experts in the House of Lords are expected to speak, including the former Governor, Lord MacLehose.