

A fierce critic steps down

By SHIRLEY YAM

FOR the first time in 30 years, Mr Jimmy McGregor can expect to spend evenings with his family, free from telephone disruptions by reporters eager to get his views on the issues of the day.

This luxury is the only major change he is contemplating when he retires from the Legislative Council in July.

Mr McGregor's decision yesterday not to seek re-election to the legislature will put an abrupt end to the 67-year-old Scot's long record of public service in Hongkong.

"This will be a complete cut from public service for me for the first time in my 45 years here," he said.

The father of two now looks forwards to spending more time with his family, on his own consultancy firm and the Hongkong Chinese Bank, where he works as a director.

"My wife is happy with my decision. For the past 16 years, my time at home has never been free from phone calls from reporters," he said.

Starting his civil service career as an executive officer in the Commerce and Industry Department in 1954, Mr McGregor was deputy commissioner of customs before he became director of the Hongkong General Chamber of Commerce in 1988, he climbed another rung up the ladder of power to represent the 130-year-old influential chamber in Legco.

His reputation as an articulate critic of the establishment soon brought him to prominence in the public arena. He has never been diplomatic in his criticisms against the Chinese communist regime. During the 1984 Sino-British talks on the future of Hongkong, Mr McGregor even put it on record that he was not convinced that any Chinese blueprint for Hongkong could succeed.

He has maintained in public that investors could not trust China not to meddle with the territory's administration.

His rift with the conservative business lobby surfaced when he moved a strongly-worded motion in Legco to deplore the extremely undemocratic and conservative [political] model in the Basic Law a year ago.

Eager to keep the Chamber of Commerce above politics, its ex-chairman Dr Helmut Sohmen openly disassociated the body from Mr McGregor's political views at its annual meeting last year.

Dr Sohmen's unprecedented move triggered weeks of intense debate in the press between two sides.

Even before he secured a Legco seat, some conservative businessmen had already found his uncompromising attitude against Beijing irritating. Determined to scupper his election plan in 1988, his opponents rallied behind Miss Veronica Wu to challenge him in the functional constituency polls to prevent him from further "rocking the boat".

Relying mainly on support from smaller companies, particularly the Indian ones, Mr McGregor managed to knock out Miss Wu by a comfortable margin of 478 to 236 votes. In his past three years as the chamber's nominee in Legco, he has been trapped in a debate on whether he should toe the business body's line. Mr McGregor is adamant that his constituents' mandate for him entails a right for him to speak his mind in the law-making assembly, even though he has been careful to stress that his political assertions are not identical to those of the chamber.

He has accused his opponents of "vote planting" by getting a large number of companies, which are otherwise uninvolved with the chamber, registered as chamber voters.

Denouncing the manoeuvre as a plot that "stinks", Mr McGregor, however, said: "I

should take all these political moves as a compliment. To have the chamber's whole machine running against one individual, he must be somebody."

Calling himself an independent, he has kept himself at arm's length from the liberal activists although he does not conceal his admiration for the democratic ideals of their leader, Mr Martin Lee Chu-ming, who heads the 500-strong United Democrats.

Seeking to push a more moderate political line, he co-founded a political group - the Hongkong Democratic Foundation - with fellow legislators Dr Leong Che-hung and Mrs Elsie Tu.

The foundation, launched last June, now boasts a membership of about 300. Many of them are professionals, businessmen and expatriates describing themselves as Hongkong believers.

The group, however, did not make its mark in the district board elections last March as only two of its candidates were successful.

It has failed to nominate anybody for the 27 seats up on offer in next Sunday's direct elections to the Urban and Regional Councils.

The group had initially five sitting legislators among its ranks.

But Mrs Tu resigned from the foundation soon after it was formed on the grounds that she had expected it to be an apolitical group.

Two weeks ago, an appointed legislator, Miss Leung Wai-tung, also took a surprising move to quit the party as she

found it too involved about middle-class issues.

Councillor Dr Leong has also relinquished his chairmanship of the foundation.

Mr McGregor's latest move is seen as a further blow to both its strength and morale.

Conceding that his withdrawal may be bad for the party's image, Mr McGregor said he would remain in the group.

He also pledged to campaign for his fellow foundation member and incumbent legislator, Mr Chan Ying-lun, in the territory's maiden direct elections to Legco in September.

"It takes time for a political party to mature. But I am happy to work with a group of young, hard working and sincere people who have a pure motive," he said.

M. P. K. Co.
H. K. Co.
H. K. Co.