

RAMBLING AT RANDOMby Tim Hamlett

Advantages of having a complaisant Govt

DEFENDERS of Hongkong's "laissez-faire" capitalist system usually praise it as the mystery force behind the local economic miracle, the benign filler of five million ice-bowls, the key to the production powerhouse of the Orient and so on.

But there are other advantages to having a complaisant Government and unfettered big business. Where else, for example, does life have that little extra spice of daily danger which adds flavour to the otherwise tedious business of getting a living?

Tickle up your jaded taste buds, for example, with a visit to the nearest construction site. It won't be far away.

Construction sites are probably the most dangerous places in Hongkong, and no wonder, since the most basic safety rules are daily violated in full view of any passer-by, with no apparent consequences to anybody except the hapless workers.

Look at the fellow who is standing next to the inevitable noisy pile-driver. Is he wearing ear protectors? He isn't wearing a helmet either, but that should excite no comment because in Hongkong safety helmets on building sites are visibly optional.

Now look at the scaffolder who is swinging effortlessly through a network of bamboo poles like a distant monkey.

He is swinging effortlessly because he is not burdened by that effeminate Western innovation, the safety harness.

Nor are passers-by denied the chance to participate in

this happy scene. True, a covered way is provided for their use. But this usually finds an alternative role as a parking space for reinforcing rods, wheel-barrow, compressors and other builders' items, so that the pedestrians can play the chicken in the street with passing cars.

Often this game is made more exciting by a liberal distribution of mud on the road.

It is more difficult for members of the general public to discern what happens in the colony's towering industrial buildings. But some details have emerged since the last fire in one of them.

True to the "waste not want not" spirit, it seems, local industrialists see no need to let valuable space lie idle just because it may, in some unlikely emergency, be needed as a fire escape.

So even those workers whose tasks offer a numbing measure of safety can keep themselves awake with the thought of their dubious chances of escape if the building catches fire.

All these perilous practices are, of course, against the law. You would expect this in a colony of Britain, where factory work offers such a soporific level of security that some workers take beds to work with them (scoff not, if you hadn't heard this before — some of them were sacked for it last year).

The overworked men whose task it is to enforce Hongkong's regulations will tell you that they just haven't got the manpower.

This is plainly the consequence of a fine discrimination on the part of our leaders, who can

recruit hordes of people when they want to — to combat the social evils of hawking and hut-building, for example.

The Hongkong resident who hasn't had his daily dose of danger at work has nothing to worry about. There is still the journey home ...

Real sensation-seekers travel by bus. CMB is a bit of a disappointment here. In spite of generous overloading the company's buses obstinately refuse to do anything more stimulating than slither into the occasional unwary pedestrian.

the bus with sacks of sand (simulating a load of passengers who all perversely refused to travel on the lower deck) and the driver then flung the machine around, demonstrating that it was impossible to persuade it to flip over on its side.

Not in Kowloon it isn't. The KMB bus seems to be a tired creature, given to lying down in moments of crisis.

It may be, of course, that the proposed 100 per cent fare rise was designed to allow KMB to improve the stability of its machines by bolting bars of gold to their bottoms.

Where anything goes and your life with it too

Any sense of loss this may engender is more than assuaged on the other side of the harbour, where the bus drivers manage to persuade their buses into acrobatic feats which are supposed to be impossible.

If we may digress for a moment there used to be a standard television news story in the UK (regularly resurrected on quiet nights) in which some newly produced double-decker was put through its paces on a London Transport testing track.

The high point of this performance came when they loaded the top deck of

Train travellers need not feel completely left out. The Kowloon Canton Railway opened up a whole new area of excitement and insecurity last Christmas when it managed to get two trains on the same track going in opposite directions.

There is a large and fascinating literature on railway accidents in the UK (where, indeed, there is a large literature on anything to do with railways) and many of the most succulent examples come from single track lines.

These disasters led in turn to a long history of ingenious devices and

procedures designed to avoid trains being dispatched towards each other on the same track. The KCR still seems to be in the forefront of innovation in this field.

It could only be inferred from their explanatory statement after the near miss that, when some contractor's workman had put a pick through the usual electronic system, service was resumed with the signalmen ringing each other up on the phone.

The KCR spokesman conceded that it appeared this system was in need of further refinement, and it has doubtless now been changed. Passengers on the KCR will have the privilege of participating in a further experiment, next time the normal signalling system breaks down.

A better prospect for thrills at this time of the year, perhaps, are the Outer Island ferries. As they float in tentative circles in the middle of some fog bank, passengers can enjoy the poignant thought that the radar set which would tell their driver where he is can be imagined, sitting quietly dormant in a corner of the wheelhouse, acting as a useful table for the parking of empty noodle pots, Coca Cola tins and other vital aids to navigation.

The trouble with all this excitement on the way home is, of course, that the weary commuter may decide he could now do with a bath. This could be a fatal mistake.

Regular readers of the public prints will know that for years some killjoys have been pressing the Government to take the bubbling excitement out of

bathtime by preventing the installation of water heaters which can gas the unwary householder in the midst of his ablutions.

Happily the Government is doing a grand job of resisting this pressure. It has adopted a procedure which appears to perform the delaying function in Hongkong which is supplied in the mother country by Royal Commissions. Consultants are being appointed.

To be more precise consultants have been selected, and a haggle over their remuneration is now taking place.

These learned gentlemen will probe the gas industry in Hongkong, cogitate, and produce a report which will doubtless have to be incubated by at least two committees before anything which could be mistaken for action emerges.

Plainly this could take some time. So we can relax in complete confidence that Hongkong householders will be able to enjoy the delights of Belsen in their bathrooms for years to come.

We must however deplore the fact that Government flats are even now undergoing a simple modification designed to prevent civil servants turning up at the Pearly Gates with nothing but a few bubbles and a loofah to cover their nakedness with.

This is unfair. It comes dangerously close to giving the whole game away. Moreover civil servants need a bit of excitement just as much as the rest of us.

Why should they be deprived of the joys of Hongkong life for which they are, after all, ultimately responsible?