

A better Hongkong without votes?

Hongkong, and probably London too, knows Mrs Elsie Elliott well enough to be certain that as long as she remains politically active the demand for reform will be pressed vigorously and repeatedly, and she is never likely to take "no" for an answer. Once again London has rejected proposals for political reform.

The pros and cons of having elected members in Legislative Council are well known by now and it is difficult to imagine any British Government agreeing to such a change at this stage of Hongkong's history. This not because reform and change is bad or undesirable; far from it. How to find Unofficials who will effectively represent the real needs and aspirations of the Hongkong people has never been more important.

But as the reform group realise, the plea for change is unlikely to end with the introduction of elections for Unofficials. From the way in which the elected members kick against the traces in Urban Council and particularly its autocratic chairman it is apparent that they will not be satisfied until elected members have a significant say in determining policy.

Constitutional changes of a fairly drastic kind will be the only way of satisfying this demand, and neither the Government in Hongkong or in London is likely to accept that this is the general wish of the people at present. London has indeed witnessed the winds of change in many of its colonies in the postwar years and has bowed to its inevitability wherever this seems the unanimous popular demand.

The day may come when an increasingly sophisticated middle class in Hongkong will swing its weight behind the reform movement as a means of having a greater say in the way the territory is run. But at the moment, most are politically wise enough to realise that the present Hongkong system, in spite of all its many faults, has brought about higher real incomes and a better way of life for many.

It is still very far from ideal and it is necessary to ensure that people's real needs are discerned and met, if not through traditional forms of constitutional reform, then by developing and improving the Hongkong system that has served us tolerably well in the postwar years.

We say "discerned and met" because the great weakness in the system of Government by committee on which members of the public are represented, is that too often these are dominated by people pressing their own private interests, too often the wrong kind of opinion passes off as the genuine public view, and too often Government officials will filter out all but the views they want to hear.

The hardest task is to recognise that affluence, however worthy an attainment for any community, breeds its own particular problems which call not for less Government effort but more. This is not only for the sake of the many who have failed to catch the upswing but the many who seek more out of life than an electronically equipped, well-upholstered concrete cell with a depressing window view of the outside world.

Mrs Elliott and her associates put their faith in the ballot box as the righter of all wrongs, and it is the system that Westminster has expounded for millions of people (with varying degrees of success) all over the world. Geo-political reasons apart, the Government believes it can do better without it.

Time is running short and there are millions who are yet to be convinced that the Government has all the answers. Unless we can make major headway in recognising and satisfying a public who has over the years shown itself to be patient and long-suffering but whose mood could change suddenly, particularly with any sharp economic decline, the decade of the 80s may see the ending of the Hongkong miracle.

Keeping the mandate of heaven may be an old-fashioned attitude but it remains as true today as it was in the times of dynastic rule in China. If the ballot box is an alien concept in Chinese political thinking, a right-minded, responsive, alert, and concerned government is indispensable today. We are still struggling to achieve that ideal.