

THE SIGHTS AND THE SOUNDSby Bernard Fong

# Are we in at long last for a spate of liberal conversions?

LADY Lydia Dunn last week graced the newspapers with a dynamic speech. As resonant as the message was, one senses that the Friday address was aimed not so much at the Hongkong people but at China, the great bogey.

The past year saw Lady Lydia lurch from the establishment. She argued with Sir Philip Haddon-Cave and scolded the government. Her sudden conversion seemed quite startling (akin, excuse the hyperbole, to the Apostle Paul Damascus Road odyssey). But even then, one felt the squabbles were only a Romeo and Juliet tiff or a family feud.

Could it be that since the death knell of the status quo has been tolled, Hongkong would soon see a spate of liberal conversions?

But last week came the baptism. Lady Lydia may have seen the light, speaking out for elections to the Legislative Council and advocating the evolution of Hongkong into a full-fledged democracy.

Well, a belated welcome to the weathered bandwagon, Lady Lydia. She is not the first to herald the idea. But she is the most prominent figure to extol the cause, lending her lustre to the stodgy campaign, galvanising upper-class interest.

## Fanfare

With fanfare, Hongkong — whose industries are gearing for the 21st century — has entered the 19th century political realm. Instead of sparring with a shadow, this columnist might as well get on with the bout, using Lady Lydia's speech to the Foreign Correspondents' Club as foil for a little punchy polemics.

Lady Lydia (herein abbreviated to LL), when prodded by reporters, conceded: The British presence is not essential to Hongkong in the future.

Bernard Fong asks: If the British presence is not essential, why is she against a deadline on the Beijing-London talks? If the British are a superfluous factor in the Hongkong future, would it not be all the more urgent to wrap up the protracted wranglings and get on with building a better tomorrow?

LL contended: Hongkong cannot stand still.

BF replies: How can this vibrant city — with its daily bedlam and ruckus — be still? The colony has progressed, thanks mainly to the hardy workers and the diligent entrepreneurs. The only thing that seems inert is the government — including the Executive and Legislative Councils — clasp tightly onto a faded past while Hongkong races into the future. Hongkong today has the industrial and commercial apparatus that rivals the best in the world, and yet it still hangs onto an archaic system rooted in the 19th century. If the ghost of Queen Victoria descends on Hongkong today, she would recognise the administration as a relic of what she reigned over in the Raj

days.

Lady Lydia criticised China for unilaterally imposing a September deadline on the talks, saying "both sides are now talking and as long as the talks are continuing I see no reason why, on a certain date in September, they most come to a halt."

BF counters: Deadline is something man lives with — like deadline for taxes, for stories, for payment of bills. A world without deadlines would be chaotic, as people dither and dawdle, and nothing could be accomplished — on time. Lady Lydia herself said in her delivery that: "It is (the) stability (consistency?) of policy and practice that enables people to know where they stand today..." Without deadlines, and with diplomats stalling, the people will not "know where they stand". Would it not be better to conclude the two-year old verbal marathon on a sprint? When the talks are concluded and the fate of the colony known without equivocation, then it will be time to shunt doubts and vagaries aside and to start in earnest the building process. If the talks drag on, cynicism, rumours, resignation, all the negative reactions would be aggravated. The confidence crisis is one of uncertainty — of not "knowing where they stand". The Falklands War, for example, was caused as much by the adventurous Argentine junta as by the misunderstanding and raised expectations born of 25 years of tedious haggling between London and Buenos Aires. Not knowing where they stood, the generals marched.

LL applauded the present "consultation and concensus" practice for procuring and ensuring prosperity and stability.

BF surmises: The code "consultation and concensus" bandied by Lady Lydia and her colleagues as the present Hongkong answer to democracy is what George Orwell had termed "the perversion of the English language for propaganda." The sage essayist, a linguistic purist, wrote certain strategic words must retain their pristine meaning, else they would mean nothing. Words should clarify, not confuse; else, they are just verbiage.

## Concensus

Concensus means "a general agreement or a majority of opinion", and the only way to ascertain concensus is by elections.

"Concensus" in Hongkong has always been assumed since there has never been a sweeping poll to determine what exactly the majority want and think. Consultation means "the seeking of advice", and Hongkong all along has sought advice, but not necessarily from the public. Often advice has come not from the hawkers and the factory hands but from the professional consultants, usually hired abroad at great expense. If, by consultation, Lady Lydia means liaisons between the bureaucracy and the Legco and Exco stalwarts, then, by George, consultation prevails here.

behind a legislative veil. But if it is grassroots consultation she implies, then the case of the South Atlantic Funds in which \$21 million was lavished on a foreign cause makes a mockery of her claim.

LL cited in her FCC speech "the recognition of the need to retain the consent of the governed" as one of the "pillars of society."

BF queries: "The consent of the governed", a noble belief, but how is this consent gauged? Is the Hongkong "consent" proven by public apathy in government in which the individual has no say anyway? One doubts the public has ever consented to those cushy benefits for the expatriate officials or to "misappropriating of pension funds", according to an auditor's report last year.

LL expounded that "Nowadays, we accept that a society cannot really be free unless every member has a fair chance to exercise that freedom, for economic and social repression limit (*sic*) that freedom as much as political repression. A man who has a vote but cannot choose his occupation, a wife who cannot choose how many children she will have, a child who is deprived of education — none of them is really free."

### Confounded

BF responds: "Freedom", the vaguest and most abstract of words, has confounded scholars and laymen for ages. Isaiah Berlin, political theorist, dissected "freedom" and still could not thoroughly examine its parts in *Two Essays on Liberty* because freedom could be interpreted freely; thus the catch.

Defining "freedom" in the Western political sense, liberty flourishes here. A man can choose his occupation, in theory but not in practice. More often than not, it is the occupation that chooses the man.

A woman can have as many children as she can bear, in theory; in practice, again, a Hongkong woman is less inclined to rear a large brood because her family cannot afford the cost, the stress, and the headache.

A child today is guaranteed a basic education. But finance often hampers a child's schooling. What Hongkong must deal with is not the absence of education opportunities, but the lack of quality education for most. A rich man can educate his child better than can a poor man. An expatriate official, whose career perquisites include education subsidies for his child, can have his daughter matriculated at the finest institutions.

A squatter, saddled with too many responsibilities here and must remit money to relatives in China, may be forced to take his girl out of school and send her to a factory long before her potentials are explored. Freedom is more than just having or not having; it is a matter of degree.

Lady Lydia has the freedom of speech just as anybody else does, in theory. But her liberty is enhanced because she can speak up at the podium or behind a lectern and be heard, with the media ready to spread her message. An obscure vendor, too, has the liberty of speech from a stump in Victoria Park or a housing estate bench, but the influential forum will surely be closed to her. Lady Lydia, with her credentials and connections, can have more effect with her delivery. When Lady Lydia talks, she is followed by a press horde, basking in strobe lights and klieg lights, with journalists jotting down every syllable; when an anonymous woman speaks aloud from a street corner, it would be a sure invitation for the police — and perhaps the Castle Peak attendants.

On parliament, LL said, "...if the power...of an elected legislature is not subject to some restraint it can easily become, under the guise of democracy, as tyrannous (*sic*) as any medieval Tsar."

BF counters: A lucid — but also, in a way, ludicrous — statement. One cannot imagine an elected legislature of not being "subject to some restraint", for the fact that the body is elected and not appointed indicates restraint, effective restraint. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her cabinet are bridled by the British electorate. If she betrays her mandate, fouls up the state, the constituencies would register their rebuke in the next ballot. If she transgresses or strays too far from her platform, Neil Kinnock of the opposition Labour Party would pounce on her. Another check is the probing and aggressive Fleet Street press, especially the liberal *Guardian* and the highbrow *Times* which are only too eager to scoop stories and twit the government with scathing commentaries, no doubt egged on by the intellectuals and armchair pundits, of whom there are so few in Hongkong.

### Crescendo

Concluding her speech in a crescendo, LL rhapsodised: "There is one...essential factor — the human factor, the people who have chosen to live here. It is their intelligence, hard work, resourcefulness, imagination, (and) resilience that have transformed Hongkong from that 'barren rock with hardly a house upon it' to the thriving, prosperous, go-ahead society it is today."

BF agrees: From Lady Lydia, cliché kudos to the Hongkong people who have been wearing many crowns lately. The privileged folks now bestowing laurels on the proletariat and touting the virtue of hard work are, one suspects, the same tycoons and financiers who have earned millions and British titles on the travail of the now heroic labourers.

Not long ago when the communists stood up and hailed the workers, the taipans and the managers flinched and frowned, shouting "Subversion! Beware of the red menace, of the rabble rousers!" If blood, sweat and tear are so appreciated, why is the managerial class Lady Lydia exempted from crusading for stronger and better unions in Hongkong? Ringing Rhetoric, unless matched with concrete deeds, is just purple prose amplified.

For Lady Lydia, the belated convert to popularist politics, here is a quote from Winston Churchill: "There is no such thing as public opinion; there is only published opinion." The darn disheartening thing is, some opinions espoused by the renowned always manage to get published and propagated, while others' are but echoes in the void.

Also basking in the limelight lately is Sir Sze-yuen Chung who believes he does not *represent* views as he *reflects* them. Sir Sze-yuen is not the voice of the people, he muses; he is only their mirror. This is a nifty twisting of the word "reflect" and its nuance. But common sense suggests — and semantics agrees — that to reflect views is to represent them. The difference is about as distinct as saying "I am not that boy's father. I am his daddy."

And last week the celebrity parade pressed on with Sir Peter Blaker, chairman of the British Hongkong parliamentary group, visiting the city and eliciting public views. To the press, Sir Peter intoned "the Hongkong people would like to continue their present way of life." This is like saying "we like our eggs round." But, one wonders, if this general statement — now a platitude, having been spouted by so many so often — means anything. Orwell said when a phrase had been waxed so repetitively its relevance would wane. What is this "present way of life"? Does it mean "the present way of life" for the privileged? Or does it mean the joy of trudging through Nathan-road at peak hour, the thrill of hearing the incessant drilling and dredging on the street from dawn to dusk, the ecstasy of congested urban living and the elation of six-day work weeks? The perfunctory "present way of life" phrase is about as profound as the observation that "the Buddha is fat and he smiles a lot."

The stating of the obvious has never sounded so bland. Quick, bring back Churchill, Samuel Johnson, Arnold Toynbee — if not, please Edward Heath, return for an encore.

The other English daily last week lauded the Lady Lydia clarion call for democracy. But not many months ago the same paper excoriated the Hongkong students for their "imprudence" in requesting the same. Could it be that the wish of one is wisdom and that of the other is rubbish? Democracy is having a poor start in the Hongkong English establishment press.