

An election proposal may mean a new phase in Sino-British talks

Colonial constituency

By Michael Specter



For the first time, a member of the Executive Council of the Hongkong Government has called for elections and indicated publicly that

a British presence in the territory would not be absolutely necessary to ensure its stability after 1997, when China regains sovereignty. Lydia Dunn floated the idea while answering questions after a speech at the Foreign Correspondents' Club in which she said she favoured elections to the Legislative Council, and perhaps eventually to the Executive Council.

While it has been standard practice for Britain to install a home-rule government before they leave a colony, Hongkong has been an exception because China will assume sovereignty over the territory when the current lease expires rather than the territory gaining independence.

Neither Britain nor China has shown any inclination to bring democracy to Hongkong, and there has been little public interest in the past. But in trying to determine just who will legislate local affairs as the British prepare to leave, there appears to be no effective alternative. Until now it has been widely assumed that Hongkong residents showed little interest in political affairs because they were aware that China would never allow elections or self-rule.

Although she did not attach a specific time frame to her proposals, Dunn's call for elections may signal a major shift in policy, in part because her close connection to Hongkong authorities makes it unlikely that she would have made such suggestions without discussing them with members of the government. Dunn's speech came only days before Xu Jiatur, director of the local branch of Xinhua, the Chinese newsagency in Hongkong — and effectively China's official spokesman — stated Peking's commitment to retaining Hongkong's capitalist system, and a large measure of its autonomy, for at least 50 years. The two events seem to indicate that a new stage has been reached in the Sino-British negotiations on the territory's future.

Xu, speaking on January 10 at Hongkong University, repeated Peking's pledge to make Hongkong a special administrative region within China which will be managed by local officials. Yet, while it was the first time this arrangement has been announced formally by a Chinese Government official, no mention was made of the method that

would be used to select the officials who would run Hongkong. Xu made no reference at all to elections of any kind in Hongkong.

The talks between London and Peking, which have been conducted amid great secrecy over the past seven months, appear to have entered a more amicable phase since December. After initial hostility and verbal fusillades issued by Peking, both China and Britain now agree that "progress" is being made. The next round is scheduled to begin in Peking on January 25.

Reactions to Dunn's comments have been largely favourable in Hongkong. Hongkong people have argued that unless Britain allows the territory to develop more substantial political institutions, Peking will have no choice but to conduct Hongkong's affairs by itself. Initial reaction from China has appeared positive as

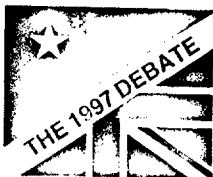
well. While Xinhua has not yet taken a stance, both *Wen Wei Po*, and *Ta Kung Pao*, Hongkong's leading leftwing newspapers, which usually reflect Peking's views, endorsed Dunn's call for elections, presumably because it bolsters China's assertion that the Chinese are capable of administering Hongkong's affairs without British assistance.

Many of Hongkong's community leaders have now shown their support for elections of some kind. Sir Sze-yuen Chung, leader of the Unofficial Members of the Executive Council, said that at present he could not "represent" but must only "reflect" the views of Hongkong people because the government is not representative. "Inevitably, there must be constitutional re-arrangements here," said former head of Jardine Matheson David Newbigging, who has had close contacts with China for some time and recently retired from the Executive Council.

Political evolution

There is a sizable number of potential electoral candidates waiting in the wings

By Teresa Ma



The intense interest in the evolution of an electoral process for the policymaking machinery of Hongkong has come mainly from outspoken members of organised pressure groups, made up of a mixture of young social workers, academics and other professionals. Already some of the groups are pooling resources to draft a joint proposal to the government on electoral procedures — which may mark the beginning of a local political tradition and Hongkong's search for political figureheads.

The democratic process will most likely take shape from the district boards which now have a partially elected membership. Hongkong Government officials have hinted at the possibility of introducing more democratic elements in the district board composition and in expanding the district board portfolio to include executive powers. Sources in the government said the collegiate rather than the direct system of voting is favoured. A review under the aegis of Secretary for District

Administration David Akers-Jones is expected to be concluded soon.

Local observers said this review may bring about substantial changes in the constitution of the district boards, elections for which have been scheduled for March 1985. Changes in the district board system will have to be announced much earlier as the Hongkong public will have to be fully informed in time to register their votes this August. The Hongkong Government has given a commitment to encourage those entitled to vote to register and go to the polls, for it is in Britain's interest to be seen to advocate self-rule in the territory as they prepare to hand over Hongkong to Peking.

As well as Peking's past objection to elections, local observers say that those civic leaders appointed as Unofficial Members of the Executive Council have been another obstacle to free elections because they feel that the Hongkong public is not prepared for free elections. They also pointed out that the "unofficials" largely represented business interests which might be out-voted by blue-collar workers if there were free elections.

"A greater element of elected representation must come gradually, over time. We have already begun that process with the Urban Council and the district boards. This is just a logical evolutionary process," he added.

But while the process may make sense, serious questions persist as to how quickly — and extensively — electoral politics can be implemented. Politics in Hongkong and democratic participation have been of minimal proportions and will need careful nurturing. The institution of democracy, or the creation of legislative bodies elected by the general population (probably by an electoral college system in the early years), implies a degree of sovereignty that only two years ago would have been considered impossible.

An analyst from pro-Peking circles said that though China has not yet made official comment on the possibility of elections in Hongkong, it has hinted at support. He referred to the publicised interview between Ji Pengfei, head of Peking's Hongkong-Macau Office and Mun Chin Kin-chok, dean of the business administration department at the Chinese University of Hongkong. According to Mun, Ji said that Hongkong residents will have voting rights as well as the right to stand for elections.

As currently constituted, the only electoral power the people of Hongkong have is in voting for district board and Urban Council members. These are relatively minor municipal bodies; responsible for administering local services. And even on the Urban Council, which has jurisdiction solely in city areas (not in the New Territories), Governor Sir Edward Youde appoints a large minority of the members.

Hongkong has been ruled completely by the governor, who is appointed by London. The Executive Council sits below him and is made up of key civil servants — "officials" — and a majority of "unofficial" members from the public sector, who are appointed by the governor. The Legislative Council passes laws, but it too is wholly appointed by the governor. The district boards are Hongkong's most recent attempt at grassroots government, and elections for positions on them were held for the first time last year, with all those over 21 years old, who have been resident for at least seven years, eligible to vote.

Creating democracy out of this system will not be easy. The largest obstacles are the lack of any significant local political consciousness and, of course, China.

"The Chinese leadership probably will

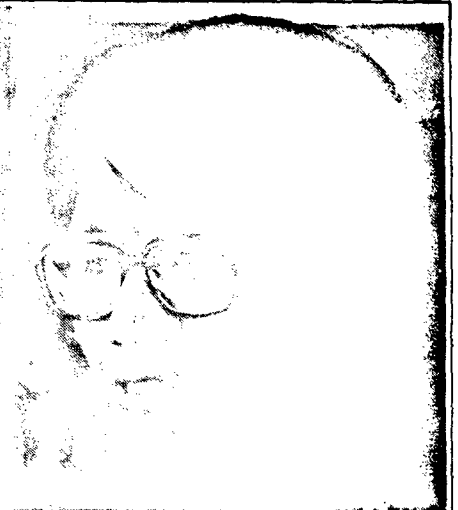
not be too excited about this plan because democracy means a level of opposition they cannot tolerate," said Lee Ming-kwan, a professor of sociology at Hongkong Polytechnic and one of the territory's more active political figures. "The British were very smart to float this idea because whatever support it gains adds credibility to the Hongkong Government. And Peking cannot afford to denounce anything the people of Hongkong appear to want."

In his speech at Hongkong University, Xu stated that Hongkong citizens would enjoy a social and economic mandate that other Chinese citizens do not have. He said they will retain freedom of speech, of the press and of movement in and out of the territory. Hongkong will be allowed to maintain and develop economic relationships with foreign countries, and authorities in the territory would have the power to issue travel documents.

But what this apparent autonomy — the word independence is one that the Chinese abhor — will mean for the territory after 1997, is still unclear. What travel documents will Hongkong residents possess and under what conditions will they be permitted to travel? Will the economic relationships Hongkong retains extend to trade with Taiwan — which accounts for a

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Tam, Cheong-leen; Lau: likely to succeed?

Hongkong is looking for leaders who will mature in their responsibilities so they can exercise to the fullest extent the autonomy promised by Peking. Future local leadership may be found within elected members to the district boards, the Urban Council, high-profile members within the "unofficials" and outspoken individuals of pressure groups.

But the elected bodies must be given more responsibilities if they are to attract more mature candidates (so the argument goes) and so attract to the polls a larger percentage of eligible voters than the present pathetically small numbers.

Although nobody can yet identify those who will eventually emerge as the interim Hongkong leaders, some personalities are clearly likely candidates. They include:

Maria Tam, a barrister who serves on both the legislative and executive councils and is an elected member of the Urban Council and one district board.

Hilton Cheong-leen, chairman of the Urban Council and the Hongkong Civil Association which sponsored a number of candidates in the last round of district board elections.

Allen Lee, who recently led a group of young professionals to Peking to present

their views on Hongkong's future to the Chinese Government.

Denny Huang, an elected member of the Urban Council. He is a medical practitioner with particular interest in housing and employment and has a popular following.

Christine Loh, a lawyer and leading member of the Hongkong Observers, the best-known pressure group for political reform in the territory.

Lau Chin-sek, head of the Christian Industrial Committee, and one of the few strong advocates of labour reform in Hongkong.

sizable share of its Asian business? And will freedom of speech include the right to disagree with the decisions of the central government in Peking?

The Chinese are likely to accept democracy in Hongkong only in small doses. Most observers agree that if political leaders capable of administering the affairs of the territory appear before 1997, Peking might feel it less attractive to station officials in Hongkong to run the territory. But without such a group — and none has yet emerged — China will have no alternative but to send in people to run what will instantly become their most sophisticated city. A certain level of autonomy has always been implicit in Chinese assertions that people in Hongkong will not be forced back into the fold after 1997.

But the Peking authorities have seen democratic ideas get out of hand before, and if elections and wide participation in government means the development of opposition parties in Hongkong, most local observers believe a curtain would surely fall to contain excessive freedom.

"The trick comes in moving fast enough to find leaders to fill the vacuum created by the departure of Britain while keeping the process within bounds that China will allow," said Yeung Sum, a spokesman for the pressure group Meeting Point, which argues that though Hongkong is part of China, certain freedoms must be retained after the British leave. "If the Chinese Government believes that some form of democracy will help stabilise Hongkong politically and economically, then I think it is in their best interests to give it a try."

But as the Chinese have shown with their stance towards Taiwan, independence is not an option which they will entertain. In recent meetings with Hongkong civic leaders, Chinese Government officials have pointed to Taiwan repeatedly. "Their message," said one Hongkong resident who recently visited Peking to discuss the 1997 issue, "was you can be free to a point. But don't push it."

Whatever electoral future there is for Hongkong is not likely to be diverse, nor

are elections probable in the near future on any large scale. One frequently mentioned scenario would bring greater participation to the territory's population in waves, starting at the bottom of the legislative pyramid. This would mean that by about 1985 a significant percentage of the members of district boards would be elected. At that time the boards would be granted greater powers to govern the municipality.

By 1987 the Legislative Council could have its first elected members — though at first they would be only a handful. Then, slowly, a greater proportion of the council's members would be elected until 1997, when the body would entirely cease to have appointed representatives.

Of course the nature of elections in a territory where there can be no significant variations among parties — if parties would even be permitted — could be strange. It remains to be seen, or even imagined, what a candidate would use as a platform. What would distinguish one political aspirant from another, for instance, except promises that could only be kept if the central government allowed them?

Even now, on the Hongkong side of the border, questions exist about how successful such elections would ever be. "I don't necessarily see the point of them," said Li Fook-wo, a member of the Executive Council. "I think we have to take a long look before we move to any form of direct elections in Hongkong. We are very far away from elective parties here now — after all, this is not a country."

Although Li's pessimism would seem to be confirmed by the fact that Hongkong residents have rarely bothered to vote when they have had the chance — in Urban Council elections, for instance — the territory cannot really afford the long look he recommends. Creating a political constituency with any clout and expertise will take all the time Hongkong has left. And while the task is vital, it will not be easy. Politics born on a tightrope, under the constant scrutiny of two such different parents as Britain and China, will require extremely talented acrobats. ■

DIPLOMACY

Low-key fife and drum

The Reagan-Zhao talks get off to a quiet but productive start in Washington

By Richard Nations

Washington: The most exciting moment of the official welcome for Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang on the White House lawn was a traditional fife-and-drum parade past the podium where the Chinese leader stood with his host, United States President Ronald Reagan.

There was none of the supercharged emotional atmosphere that marked Deng Xiaoping's American tour as vice-premier in 1979, nor of the high international drama surrounding former US president Richard Nixon's 1972 China odyssey. But this more sober note was greeted with relief by US officials. After three topsyturvy years, they hope, the Sino-American relationship is finally settling down to a more stable, if less exciting, maturity.

In their opening statements both leaders took pains to minimise the contentious and problematic aspects of their relations. Zhao did not mention Taiwan explicitly, but stressed only that each nation should adhere "strictly to the principles confirmed by both sides in the joint communiqués." This helps Reagan who, in an election year, is worried that lack of enthusiasm among the pro-Taiwan conservatives might dissipate the wave of support that carried him into the White House in 1980.

For his part, Reagan played down any anti-Soviet rhetoric, avoiding code words like "strategic cooperation" and "alliance," which are neither in tune with China's non-aligned image nor helpful in its normalisation talks with Moscow. Instead he switched the focus from the global to the bilateral and emphasised particularly the prospects for economic cooperation.

"It is our belief," a senior official told the press, "that it is the bilateral aspects of the relationship on which many of the benefits of international cooperation are based." Reagan's decision last month to crack down on textiles imports illustrates the underlying economic conflict of China expanding low-value manufactured exports in the teeth of election-year protectionism restricting the American market.

But the foundations for broader economic cooperation between the two countries were consolidated over the past year as China further opened its energy sector — petroleum, coal, hydropower and nuclear energy — to US capital, and Reagan opened the gate for the American high-technology exports necessary for China's modernisation.

Zhao's real business in Washington is to broaden such cooperation. He was due to



Dunn; Xu: a turning point in the talks?