

Accord rejection gives the British a way out

IT'S always the same," said a disillusioned British diplomat, as accusations flew thick and fast that London had sold the territory out yet again, during last week's 34-11 Legislative Council vote against the Court of Final Appeal accord.

"We take these decisions together with the Hongkong Government, but they leave us to take all the blame."

That is not a commonly-held view - nor is it an entirely accurate one. But those off-the-cuff remarks by one outspoken British Foreign Office official are only the most extreme example of what seems to be growing British disillusionment at the Hongkong Government's mishandling of the debate over the court's composition.

For although other British diplomats are far more circumspect, the basic implication of their comments is still much the same, however much they may seek to deny it.

They say London would never have agreed to the controversial 4-1 mixture of judges in the Joint Liaison Group (JLG) had they known the scale of the adverse reaction it would provoke in the territory.

And although they are reluctant to point the finger at precisely who failed to warn them of the likely hostility of local legislators and lawyers towards such a deal, the answer is all too obvious; Lower Albert Road.

Even the ultra-cautious leader of Britain's JLG team, Mr Anthony Galsworthy, last week came as close to criticising the Hongkong Government as he is likely to.



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Danny Gittings

"The primary need is for... a constant relationship between the Hongkong executive authority and the legislature to ensure that there is full understanding between them."

he said a day after the councillors voted against the accord the two governments had been so heavily promoting.

The implications became clear - even as he backed away from them in replies to subsequent questions - namely that the Hongkong Government is making Britain's task more difficult by failing to put its own house in order, and keep a good relationship with the Legislative Council.

If the idea of London being unhappy with Hongkong's handling of a controversial Sino-British issue sounds far-fetched, then it is worth remembering that is what happened last summer when London's special envoy Sir Percy Cradock told Chinese leaders the territory's administration had been far too confrontational over the Chek Lap Kok project, and so secured the signing of the airport accord.

And in the case of the Court of Final Appeal London has plenty of evidence to buttress such a case.

For Hongkong officials have publicly confirmed - perhaps at the urging of angry British diplomats, who may have seen Sir David Ford's earlier comments as a at-

However all that may change, if, as opinion polls are increasingly predicting, the opposition Labour Party takes power in next year's general election.

Labour, as its Foreign Affairs spokesman Mr George Foulkes makes clear in today's *Sunday Morning Post*, intends to pursue a different policy towards Hongkong from that of the present Government.

What he does not spell out is what he has long been saying in private; namely that one of the first acts a Labour-led administration would take would be to replace Sir David Wilson as Governor.

But, although opposition parliamentarians have long been talking about such a move - often saying Labour leader Mr Neil Kinnock has "a name up his sleeve" - it is only recently that the gossip in the House of Commons tea-rooms has begun to take on a more specific character.

One name mentioned is former diplomat Mr Ivor Richards, whose past record bodes little hope for Hongkong's future - as he was the man who brokered a much-vaunted Rhodesian peace deal that collapsed in the early '70s.

But the other name being mentioned is equally unpalatable. Mr Eric Varley, Britain's Secretary of State for Industry a decade ago, is described as a close companion of Labour's shadow foreign minister Mr Gerald Kaufman, and any move to appoint him would provoke claims that he had been chosen for the wrong reasons.

And with names like this being bandied about, it is perhaps inevitable that Hongkong will have more reason to hope for a Conservative victory next year.