

A clear case for consensus

MUCH has happened since this newspaper last week reported that the hunt was on in earnest for a successor to Hongkong's present Governor, Sir David Wilson.

Now that the search is finally out in the open, many have taken up the question then posed by this column: will the interests of the territory be uppermost when the choice is finally made?

Some believe Hongkong got its answer from the manner in which Sir David's departure was announced. London lobby correspondents and diplomatic journalists were the first to know, leaving most of the territory's news media to learn of the event via news agency wires in the middle of the night.

Others believe the delay in announcing a successor to Sir David signals that the British Government is, indeed, treating seriously the need to find someone of unique qualities to represent the people of Hongkong and deal with China in the run up to 1997.

Calls have already been heard for Hongkong to have some say in the final choice of who will occupy Government House in what is almost certain to be the final tenure of a British Governor. And, in an interview with the *Sunday Morning Post* today, Sir David himself gives assurances that London will not ignore the views expressed by the people of the territory.

But Sir David stresses that any decision will have to wait for the outcome of a British general election. Though he is no doubt simply bowing to reality, it is a great pity for the territory that this should be so.

Despite the appearance of a perpetual battlefield, consensus is not entirely unknown in British politics. There have been a number of occasions in the past where opposing political factions have managed to reach agreement on issues which all sides accept should not be decided on strict party lines. The policies to deal with terrorist acts in Northern Ireland is a case in point.

London's political leaders ought, therefore, to be able to agree and form a view on who should govern Hongkong in the next and most vital five-year period of British administration. It cannot, after all, be completely ruled out that another election could occur before that term is over. Could Hongkong then face the turmoil of two Governors in so short a time span because of the vagaries of the political scene in Westminster?

Should the British electorate produce a hung Parliament this year — an event that cannot be entirely dismissed with the Conservative and Labour parties swinging wildly ahead and behind in the opinion polls — some kind of consensus would have to be agreed anyway to deal with a situation that demands urgent attention.

Some in London have even suggested a way round the problem of finding a name acceptable to both Mr Neil Kinnock and Mr John Major may be to widen the search away from the worlds of politics and diplomacy and into other areas such as the military or even business. What Hongkong would prefer is the best man for the job — whichever party label he carries, or none — in place as soon as possible so the issues now awaiting his attention can be dealt with.

Meanwhile, the people of Hongkong should not be too disappointed that Sir David confirms today that there is no possibility of a local person being in the running for the tenancy of Government House. For there is, albeit some way off, a chance for Hongkong to see realised what American political pundits often describe as a "dream ticket".

After Sir David Wilson's successor has settled into his new job, it is widely predicted that the Chief Secretary, Sir David Ford, will be retiring from his post — a pivotal role in the administration and one which carries with it much power and prestige.

With the present administration's firm commitment to localisation — a commitment repeated by Sir David today and enshrined in the Joint Declaration — it would serve Hongkong well to have at the territory's head a senior British figure who enjoys the whole-hearted support of London, and a local person as Chief Secretary who is known and trusted both here, in London and in Beijing.