

Advance party traces parameters for Patten

MR ALASTAIR Goodlad's visit was certainly most successful. At least, it is the first visit of a Foreign Office Minister with Special Responsibility for Hongkong in a long time which may be called successful by any stretch of the imagination. The Lords Glenarthur and Faithless were easy acts to follow.



MARGARET NG

But Mr Goodlad visited Hongkong not only as the new Minister for Hongkong. He made it quite obvious that he came as a precursor for the Governor-designate, Mr Chris Patten. He was here to size up the situation, and to prepare the way by heralding what may be understood as the new Patten style.

The tone is political. Democratization is the theme, and robust is the tenor. Certainly, Mr Goodlad was outspoken. The controversy he ignited as a parting gift to the local press about the amendment of the Basic Law ensures that he will not be out of mind as soon as he is out of sight.

He has set people talking. He has given people at least two things to talk about. Will the United Democrats get into Exco at last? Will Britain negotiate with Beijing to increase directly elected seats in Legco in 1995?

He then announced at the same time: Mr Patten will give you the answer when he comes; Mr Patten will consult widely when he arrives; Mr Patten will probably change the membership of Exco; after Mr Patten has taken up his post and done his consultation, "we will study [his] advice", and some higher authority than the Joint Liaison Group will broach the subject of further democratization with Beijing.

Mr Goodlad shows himself not to shy away from spreading the message, even when Beijing gave stiff warnings. It may be the often reiterated stance of Beijing that the Basic Law will not be changed before 1997. His reply is that where there is the political will to do so, the National People's Congress could make amendments to it.

It may well be a result of changing times. Back in Britain, elder statesmen such as Mrs Margaret Thatcher and Sir Geoffrey Howe have departed, leav-

ing the stage to younger politicians such as Mr John Major and Mr Douglas Hurd, who reflect more the thinking of their generation. They are more keen to get things moving and less patient with niceties. Where the elder statesmen saw obstacles and pitfalls, they would see mere shadows and mists, easily dispelled by the light of day.

If so, Mr Patten will come to Hongkong armed with a new optimism that nothing is impossible, and as Mr Goodlad kindled expectations in Mr Patten, Mr Patten will promote optimism all around himself.

The question is: how far will all this take us? How much of all this is substance?

strongly echoed that of the parliamentary debate then. And for the same reasons which one felt cynical about the debate in Parliament then, and more cynical still thereafter, one would feel aloof about Mr Goodlad's message.

But matters are worse than that. Much water has flowed under the bridge since 1984. We now know how effectual Britain has been in Hongkong's democratization. We now know the reality is that where Beijing is unwilling, Britain is powerless. We now have a whole jungle of understandings and agreements binding Britain's hands from which Britain fears to deviate.

“We now know the reality is that where Beijing is unwilling, Britain is powerless. We now have a whole jungle of understandings binding Britain's hands from which Britain fears to deviate.”

The people of Hongkong want Britain to honour its obligations to Hongkong. These obligations have always included what Britain can give to Hongkong if it chooses, such as the right of abode in Britain; and what Britain can get from others on Hongkong's behalf, such as democracy in Hongkong after 1997.

Those who had attended Parliament's debate on Hongkong back in 1984 will remember the tone of the members of parliament who spoke. One after another, they expressed optimism about China and demanded that the Hongkong Government give democracy to the people of Hongkong. They saw democratization as the way for Britain to withdraw with honour — and without cost. No one raised any doubt at all that democratization would be sufficient to solve the historical problem of Hongkong.

The message that Mr Goodlad brought last week

Will Mr Patten be able to cut the Gordian knot? Does he mean to? Here Mr Goodlad the precursor has to admit that the overall policy is one of "continuity". He was careful to repeat his government's line as set down by Mr Hurd: "First, we want to see steady progress towards a greater degree of direct elections in Hongkong. Second, we want this progress to be sustained without interruption after the transfer of sovereignty in 1997." Which does not sound as if Mr Patten will be bringing the sword.

Perhaps in spite of that, Mr Patten is determined to take up Parliament's 1984 stance, amid the cheering of liberals in Hongkong and the general public in Britain, and good luck to him — and us, of course. Democracy is worth fighting for, whatever the motive of its champions.

In any case, Mr Patten is compelled to consider opening negotiations with Beijing. Mr Hurd and Mr Major

have already committed themselves. They have said repeatedly that if the 1991 election is "successful", they would approach the Chinese Government. Although no time is given, they could hardly put this off for very much longer. Mr Major's positive reception of the United Democrats of Hongkong representatives, Mr Martin Lee and Mr Yeung Sum, in London could hardly signal it was a dismal failure. If, further, a good number of directly elected Legco members are appointed to Exco, the compulsion to declare the 1991 election a "success" will be even more irresistible.

In a way, all this forms the easy part. So long as the British Government has the political will — or reason — to do so, Mr Patten can easily appoint directly elected Legco members to Exco, and open negotiations with Beijing for a small or substantial increase in directly elected Legco seats for 1995. The latter will take a small miracle to achieve. In fact, it will take nothing short of major political changes in China. But this is no reason not to negotiate.

Moreover, provided Mr Patten makes the right moves, failure to win that increase will not cost him any loss of popularity, especially with the British public.

There is a much more difficult and much less rewarding part, but perhaps much more valuable to Hongkong in the long run, and that is to consolidate what we have already and ensure that whatever degree of democratization Hongkong enjoys is going to be real and not merely in form.

Central to this is the task of establishing a relationship between Legco, Exco and the administration which really works, in the sense that things get done properly and expeditiously, that open government is ensured and the executive is truly accountable to the people through the legislature.

The old system and old attitude are in need of overhaul. There has to be much more communication and far greater willingness to communicate. There has to be the mechanisms of communication. It must be ensured that members of the public have access in practice to the information they are entitled to, in full and in time.