

A confident prospect for Hongkong

The confident note struck by the Governor, Sir Murray MacLehose, at yesterday's official opening of Legislative Council, and the prospect he envisaged of sustained growth for the rest of this decade (6 per cent a year in real terms), provide the foundation for the full resumption of Hongkong's social and economic programmes interrupted by last year's setback.

His message will provoke all-round optimism from the lowest paid worker, who once again can bring into focus his hopes for better housing, more education, a wider spread of welfare benefits and improved labour conditions, to the businessman and industrialist on whose enterprise Hongkong depends.

It must also be hoped that the overseas investor takes as sanguine a view of prospects as the Government and local business community.

Much will of course depend on economic growth rates in the world in general and our own main markets in particular, where the first priority is to hold down inflation even if this means slowing down the pace of recovery.

Though basking in relative prosperity at the moment with a strong revival in employment and well-filled order books, Hongkong has no reason to rest on its laurels or trust in the great expectations of the future to resolve the many complex social and labour problems that persist.

Sir Murray rightly reminded us that the recession hit the shop floor much harder than the board room and he stressed that "a new effort to provide further safeguards for the work force and the low income group is therefore timely, right for our society and but common justice."

The industrialist need not wince at the prospect; it promises to make no gaping holes in his profit projections, nor saddle the Budget with an insupportable burden of expenditure.

Not only do we have to ensure that during this period of recovery we catch up with the levels of other Asian countries but guard against increasing pressure from critics of low-cost exports who contrast our labour laws and welfare programmes with those of other countries.

Many local companies already observe good labour policies for their staff but many more do not. And without imposing a ruinous load on the smaller industrialist (who still makes up a considerable part of our productive capacity) it is essential for Hongkong to bring in minimum safeguards for workers; for invariably it is they who suffer most particularly in times of setback and recession.

The Governor spoke of achieving this level "well within five years" and it must be hoped that within the next decade Hongkong can go a good deal further and attain equality with Japan.

No less important is the desire to remedy some of the major gaps in our welfare programme and the Governor mentioned specifically public assistance for the unemployed, an easy enough task to contemplate in times of full employment though this is one area where Hongkong dragged its feet during the recession.

While breadwinners out of work were able to rely to some extent on welfare handouts to dependents, able bodied people between 15 and 55 were excluded, though it is now felt their inclusion would not have imposed an intolerable strain on our Budget.

This was an anomaly raised on a number of occasions last year but which the Government found itself unwilling to tackle.

There is still, understandably, concern about the danger of abuse, and conditions are being framed to ensure that we do not descend to the absurd levels of some of the more advanced nations where the dole was distributed with a liberality which positively discouraged job seeking.

But clearly there is a strong case for helping those whose misfortune is the result of adverse economic conditions, and it is welcome that this is now to be remedied.

In any review of the year and the prospects ahead, housing is certain to find a place for as far ahead as anyone can see, regardless of how ambitious our present plans.

Not only is the problem the quantitative one of putting families into suitably furnished and equipped concrete boxes, but the qualitative one of finding the right box for the right family at the right rent or price.

And increasingly, as our building plans gain momentum fed by ever increasing injections of public and private funds, it is the latter problem which will engage our attention.

It is indeed difficult to visualise a day when the squatter problem will be solved, so great is the propensity for the Hongkong citizen to erect his own shack on his own small square of ground and to raise chickens and grow vegetables.

This basic peasant mentality will not soon be changed, any more than the Urban Council will ever succeed in putting all hawkers into shops, or all food stall operators into restaurants.

Utopia is going to be a long time coming and we cannot expect to reach it without the lurches and surges that an unpredictable world economy inflicts upon us.

But we are told it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive, and our only wish is that if lurch we must let us make sure of solid worthwhile progress in our surges.

We are apparently now on the crest of a wave and can move forward with confidence in the hope that by 1980 we can look back and feel, if not inspired, at least satisfied that solid progress has been achieved on a wide front.

That is the challenge we face today.