

A blueprint for the future?

IT WAS after his first and, possibly, most exhausting meet-the-people session on the streets of Mongkok that the newly-arrived Mr Chris Patten slumped in a chair at Government House and gave this newspaper his initial impression of Hongkong. "There is," he said, "an awful lot of work to be done . . ."

This week, after patiently listening to politicians, pressure groups and as many others as he could pack around his dinner table, he will spell out in detail how he intends to carry out that work. It is billed as a landmark speech. We hope it is.

That he has made a good beginning is beyond doubt. Already, he has managed to galvanise an administration left lethargically unsure of its role and how to pursue it. There was talk before his arrival of a creeping "Government inertia". There is no such talk now inside Mr Patten's "go for it" Government House, a place brimming with confidence and a new-found feeling that what was once impossible is now achievable.

But on Wednesday, when he rises to present 90 minutes of the Patten blueprint for the territory, he will face a much tougher challenge: galvanising the people of Hongkong.

He will be addressing an audience that will stretch far beyond the usual coterie of political figures, power brokers and pragmatic businessmen who have become the familiar faces of the territory's corridors of power. It is an audience filled with expectation. Expectation that he has, himself, deliberately hyped.

When the wraps come off a much-trailed bag of goodies designed to put right the wrongs of previous regimes, however, the most crucial issue for his audience must remain: has he produced a workable plan that will see Hongkong through not just the last years of British rule, but beyond?

For Hongkong is a territory that hardly dares stare too intently into a crystal ball. Confidence ebbs and flows in line with the mercurial Hang Seng Index. Certainty is the one commodity in desperately short supply.

The Governor has done a thoroughly professional job of endearing himself to the ordinary people. In a few short weeks, he is riding higher in the opinion polls than many, if not most, of his predecessors. He is reaping the rich rewards of a heavy schedule of kissing babies and pressing the flesh.

A major spending programme on the territory's infrastructure will no doubt enhance his popularity. For years, there have been complaints that while Hongkong produces massive wealth, not enough of it has been ploughed back into the territory to make life more bearable.

But the people of Hongkong are looking for more than new hospitals, schools and sewerage systems. With Government coffers bulging, these are the relatively easy targets. They are looking, above all, for a sure way forward beyond the time when there is a benign Mr Patten occupying Upper Albert Road.

Of course, the Governor does not bear sole responsibility for laying the foundations for a smooth transition past 1997. China's leaders in Beijing must also shoulder a lion's share of this important task.

So, to, must Hongkong's politicians, many of whom have been jockeying for position with the new leadership for weeks and who are busily laying tracer trails for a major assault on his plans if they are excluded from positions of power.

The wily politician in Mr Patten knows better than most that there will be much disappointment in the wake of an address he is aware cannot possibly meet every demand. Indeed, he confesses he has braced for a popularity ratings slump and he is marshalling his political skills to meet it.

But when the inevitable euphoria that will greet Wednesday's speech subsides, the real question that must be posed in judging Mr Patten's blueprint for Hongkong is: has he given the people hope and confidence to face the future? It is the only litmus test of success.