

A gentle breeze in Legco

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Although the Unofficials have been advocating for some time an expansion of the membership of the Legislative Council it was only last week that any firm indication was given that the Government is seriously considering this.

The Governor, in his annual address to the council, gave a solid hint when he conceded that there was "plenty of room for change" while retaining Legco's essential character.

Although Sir Murray's speech does not make any specific mention of expansion numerically it is apparent that he does not exclude the possibility.

Sir Murray points to the obvious deficiencies in the existing council. Members at present are required to be the eyes, ears and voice of the community as they see it although they themselves are drawn from the limited professional field with narrower interests.

Having ruled out all possibility of an elected legislature because of Hongkong's unique situation, the Governor says members should be able to speak from as wide a spread as possible, including a social background as well as professional experience.

Sir Murray says that he attaches paramount importance to providing opportunities for public participation at all levels. This has been reflected during the past few months with numerous appointments of ordinary men and women to Government advisory bodies as the Independent Commission Against Corruption, Mutual Aid Committees and the Consumer Council.

Besides doing considerable practical good, this has also enabled working-class people who have had no previous contact with the machinery of Government or community affairs to become involved and make contributions to advisory and other committees.

It would appear then that the Government is considering making a minor expansion of the council membership by drawing from the ranks of MAC committees.

Sir Murray stresses that the overriding requirement of members is that they have sufficient experience of public service, and ability, to carry a fair share of the exacting tasks that have to be handled by Umelco.

The performance of "fresh faces" on the Mutual Aid Committees will therefore be carefully watched.

However, trade unionists, including those in Government civil service staff associations, must also be in a position to qualify. Certainly the council should be represented by people with a wide knowledge of labour and social welfare.

In the past, one of the serious setbacks in allowing working-class people take their place in the Legco chamber has been their financial position. Unlike professional men they cannot afford to continually dip into their pockets.

However, there is no reason why allowances could not be paid to Unofficial members. This allowance could be rejected by those who are in the fortunate position of not needing it.

Sir Murray seems to have been careful not to set a time-table for any wider-based council.

However, a logical date would be around June next year when several of the present members are due to retire.

The cynics will say that this expanded council is merely a Government compromise to demands for elected representatives.

This is quite probably true. But elected representation is out of the question so there seems little point in crying for the unattainable.

At least the present proposal calls for new voices from different backgrounds. It might not represent the winds of change that many are calling for, but even a gentle breeze can be refreshing.