

A breath of fresh air

Yesterday's meeting of Legislative Council was memorable for the way in which eight new members made their maiden speeches and in doing so brought in a breath of fresh air to the proceedings.

Far from being overawed by the occasion they spoke with confidence and a refreshing candour on a variety of problems.

Moreover they accomplished this with a welcome brevity. Eight members yesterday spoke in the same time that it took five to deliver their speeches on the previous day. It must be hoped that their direct approach will not pass unnoticed by some of the older members.

The general public is, of course, less concerned with their style and delivery than in the effect it is likely to have on the day to day workings of the Government.

One must not, of course, expect miracles overnight and it will take more than eight speeches to shift the great administrative juggernaut from its predetermined course.

Yet it was at once evident that the Government would hear a variety of views that reflected the concerns and problems of a wider sector of the populace rather than the almost predictable comments of a privileged establishment. That alone made the proceedings memorable.

It was noteworthy, for example, that Legeo was able to hear not just an industrialist's opinion of proposed new labour legislation but the views of two people who are a good deal closer to the workers.

Particularly welcome in this respect was the frankness of Father Patrick McGovern. One of the major weaknesses of Legislative Council in the past has been the tendency to assume a basic dissimilarity between Chinese and Western workers in their attitudes to work, holidays and conditions.

It is pleasing to hear the views of people with closer contacts and if this leads to a better deal for the worker a little earlier than he might otherwise have received it, that will be all to the good.

Fr McGovern was careful to point out that real incomes today were basically the same as they were in 1971. It could be argued that workers have suffered less from unemployment and inflation than some of their counterparts overseas but this does not alter the fact that their conditions are ripe for improvement.

Nor can it be seriously contended that this will damage the economy if the improvements are introduced according to a carefully planned timetable.

Perhaps the most noteworthy speech was delivered by Mr Wong Lam whose well argued criticisms of the Mutual Aid Committee system commend themselves for special consideration.

These are views that are doubtless shared by many MAC committee members but because of their inability to make themselves heard in a sufficiently conspicuous public forum they have passed unnoticed.

Therein lies the true value of the new appointments: placing able men and women in a position where their voices on important matters affecting our people can be heard — and in time acted upon.