

A community of consensus

The evolution of Hongkong's Legislative Council in the postwar years from a small, narrow, paternalistic council of seniors to the far more representative and broadly-based 48-strong body it is today, is a reflection of the way in which the community itself has changed under the impact of population growth, rising living standards, economic expansion and geo-political developments.

Localisation in recent years has been less the conscious objective than a well understood ideal to be achieved as soon as possible. No council today could set out to reflect the community's views without being fully representative of the local people. And this has been achieved by choosing five new Chinese members in Legislative Council and three in Executive Council who are impressive in their own right and well able to add to the diverse opinions we have come to expect in our senior councils.

It is not the imminence of 1997 that has dictated this change; it would have happened any way. Because Hongkong in 1983 is a fully mature society well able to run itself successfully. And to do this it requires the best people available to extend their advice and pronounce their views on a variety of issues that are important to our way of life.

This could not be achieved in elections. For those who argue that there should be an elective element in Legislative Council we feel that selection is preferable to election, if only because one draws a line between those who are personally ambitious on their own account and those who show a clear ability to articulate the needs of the people. Not always do the two qualities coincide in the one person.

It is pleasing that Mr Q.W. Lee has been persuaded to return to the Executive Council where his wisdom, experience and insight in banking, financial and economic matters, plus his concern for education, will be particularly useful at this time when recovery is beginning to cast a glow over the horizon, dispelling the gloom of recession.

Likewise the very able Miss Maria Tam and Mr S.L. Chen are welcome additions to the senior council. The fact that Miss Tam occupies position No 33 in the Legislative Council shows that she has jumped over many heads to reach the top council, but this is a reflection of her diligence and her level-headed advice.

We have said before that Legco is well served by its women, and it must be hoped that the two new ladies who have just joined, Mrs Rita Fan and Mrs Pauline Ng, carry on this tradition of outstanding service given by people like Miss Lydia Dunn, the Rev Joyce Bennett, Miss Tam, Mrs Selina Chow and Dr Henrietta Ip.

Inevitably the Governor, Sir Edward Youde, turned to the District Boards for new blood, as he must if he is to make Legislative Council more reflective of the main strands of society. For while DB members are primarily concerned in local affairs, their ability to bring to the senior council the insights they have gained at the "grassroots" level is a positive advantage.

Certainly with the departure of such valued figures as Dr Rayson Huang, the Rev Joyce Bennett and Dr Henry Hu (all heavily involved in education) we need to replace this loss by finding others from a similar background. Mrs Paul Ng, in addition to being an elected DB member is a secondary school teacher, while Mr Yeung Pokwan is principal of the Ming Yin College and Mrs Rita Fan is the head of the student affairs unit of the polytechnic, a particularly valuable background because of her links with thinking and practical young people.

Of the others, Mr Chan Ying-lun is an elected DB member and a public relations manager, and Mr Poon Wing-cheung is an accountant and a member of both the Securities Commission and Commodities Training. These are professional people who should all be able to contribute more widely to Legco's busy programme.

If anyone else is likely to feel left out, apart from New Territories folk (two of whom are in the council already) it may be Urban Councillors who feel themselves being squeezed out by their District Board brothers and sisters. However, while Urban Council has its representatives in Legco and now one in Exco, it would be wrong for the Government to make face-saving appointments. Always it must be the best man or woman available.

Perhaps the most noteworthy change which received far less publicity than the new membership, was the Government's decision to reduce the official element, a sign surely that whatever fears previous Governors may have had about being outvoted have given way to the realisation that Unofficials and officials work together for the greater good.

The idea that issues should be decided by majorities is surely abhorrent in the consensus society we have striven to create in Hongkong. No Government here today could afford to steamroller unpopular legislation through on the basis of an official majority, and the realisation of this was seen only last month in the outcome of the debate on the Llewellyn education report.

The fact is that Hongkong must demonstrate increasingly that its only objective is to achieve the greatest good for all, and while undoubtedly there will be times when individuals will dissent, and say so, yet Legislative Council must show itself to be of one mind. That is an irreversible trend which the latest appointments confirm. Equally important is it that the official element should be confined to the essential minimum needed to ensure the smooth and effective conduct of business.