

## Accountants' figures alter the calculation

ACCOUNTANTS, whose credentials are recognised in nearly all Commonwealth countries, were among those most ready to quit Hongkong because of anxiety over the future of the territory. A survey conducted by their professional body found that two-thirds of the 4,600 members had applied for overseas passports, and eight out of 10 planned to leave before 1997. However, a survey conducted in the light of the British nationality package has thrown up some different results. Three-quarters say they would apply for a British passport under the proposed scheme, and nine out of 10 wanted to stay in Hongkong as long as possible. Their willingness to stay in the territory, instead of leaving to fulfil residency requirements in Canada or Australia, is the best evidence yet that the nationality package could stem the exodus from Hongkong and ease the confidence crisis in the territory.

The British Government, recognising that accountants are vital to the continuing success of Hongkong business, has allocated 1,615 places to this professional group out of the 50,000 passports on offer, in the belief that it will help to anchor them in the territory. It is a claim that has been ridiculed by the nationality package's opponents on both sides of the House of Commons, who doubt that people endowed with foreign passports will not exercise their privilege to take up rights of abode.

China, which has not missed an opportunity to denounce the plan, is also highly sceptical that beneficiaries of the scheme will still be here in 1997 to help the new Special Administrative Region, and is suspicious that it is a plot by Britain to drain its last major colony of talent and wealth, or to subvert the loyalty of key personnel in breach of the spirit of the Joint Declaration of 1984. The current New China News Agency bureau chief in Hongkong and the then Vice-Foreign Minister, Mr Zhou Nan, told the visiting British Foreign Affairs Committee a year ago that the Beijing leaders would not

oppose a plan to make more British passports available because it was a sovereign matter for the United Kingdom Government. Political changes in China, however, have prompted a policy change.

The heightened feeling since June 4 between Beijing and London has clouded a rational assessment of the implications of the scheme, whose principal aim is to encourage people to remain in Hongkong, which is in the interests of China, Britain and the territory. The demand for loyalty to the motherland from senior civil servants after 1997 has forced a choice seven years in advance. Britain and Hongkong have to persuade the Chinese authorities that their intentions are honourable, and the feedback from the accountants will be welcome material to use in that difficult task. They must impress on the Beijing leadership that the British package at least offers some hope of retaining key workers in the territory, whereas to do nothing at all would simply allow the "brain drain" to proceed at its current damaging level of some 1,000 people per week, or even worse.

Other groups earmarked to benefit from the nationality package should be polled for their reaction to the British offer, in the hope that results as helpful as the accountants' survey will emerge, thereby forming a persuasive dossier for China's consideration. If those who have already left to build up new careers in Toronto, Vancouver and Sydney are to be attracted to return, the kind of publicity which will encourage them to believe that prospects are better here depends on being able to produce such statistics. Similarly, it stands to reason that businessmen or professionals well established in Hongkong would prefer not to have to start again in another country if they can be convinced that there is a good future for them in the territory. To build that kind of confidence, so badly needed nowadays, China must play its part along with Britain and Hongkong.

Drawn from  
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