

IF LAST WEDNESDAY'S meeting of Legislative Council was notable for the statement by the Financial Secretary, Mr Philip Haddon-Cave, on the Securities Commission, there was a number of other important legislative measures which came up on the business paper, quite apart from questions.

These included the enabling Bill to reform the Urban Council, the new Television Bill, the Copyright Bill, the Inland Revenue Bill, the Rating Bill, two amendments to the Road Traffic Bill and the Import and Export Bill — each of considerable significance.

How many of them will be debated remains to be seen.

The only debate last week — if "debate" is the word — was Mr Szeto Wai's brief but amusing sally in Cantonese on the question of prestigious car number plates.

It provoked titters of laughter from the public gallery though it is doubtful whether any of the Officials or Unofficials will agree to forego their highly prized plates.

Even if they did they still have their UMELCO badges which adorn the grills of the Unofficial cars (and thereby confer the necessary degree of prestige which seems an inseparable part of this position).

But why is it that debate — or discussion — of legislation does not figure more prominently in the proceedings of the Council?

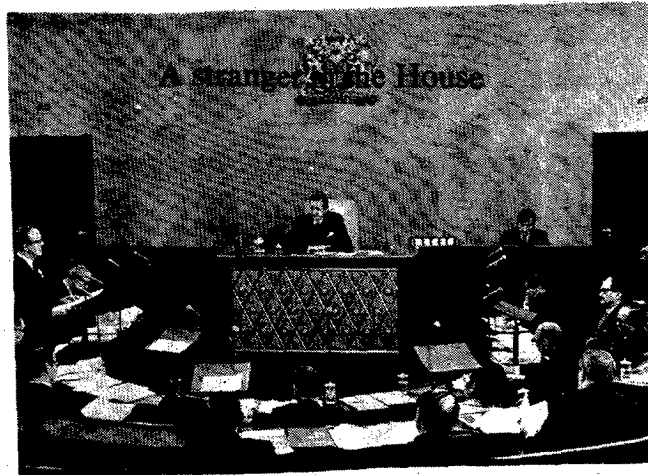
We have, of course, just finished one debating season, following the Governor's address to the new session of Council.

We are shortly entering into another debating season.

Mr Haddon-Cave introduces his budget speech next month and then will come a procession of Unofficial and Official speakers.

But it is not talking for talking's sake that is wanted.

When important legislation



An active day with little debate

This article is the first of a new series on Legislative Council and its activities.

comes up it should be publicly discussed on the second reading — not confined to the lobbies or the cocktail parties or the internal groups that meet from time to time.

The plea will be made that the Unofficials lead a busy life, that they are unpaid, have to take time off from their own businesses or occupations and that the Finance Committee takes up as much private time as Legco does public time.

All this is understood but when legislation comes up it is the Unofficials' job to present viewpoints on it, critical or otherwise, which reflect in some way what various sectors of public opinion are thinking.

If the plea is made that there

is insufficient time to prepare and deliver debates then they ought not to be occupying their present positions.

Speeches do not have to be long. The points can be made succinctly and briefly — in fact they make a greater impact if presented concisely.

As for the duration of each Council meeting, if members were a little less keen to have their wordy questions answered publicly it could be a good deal shorter.

What Legco should do is to have questions on notice answered by circulating the written answers beforehand (as is done already) but not verbally repeated.

Where a member wanted to

ask a supplementary, this he could do without notice. This would speed up question time considerably and make it far less of a tedious formality than it is today.

If question time were broadcast over the radio in English and Chinese there would be some point in retaining verbal answers to questions on notice.

But this is not, or very rarely, the case.

The only advantage in the present procedure is that radio and television reporters are able to extract some "live" part of the proceedings for broadcasting.

Is it worth it?

To stop it would not reduce the coverage Councillors receive. The newspapers would continue to give space to answers and the radio and television would be forced to summarise the replies — which would be all to the good.

In the meantime, full marks to Unofficials like Mrs Symons, Mr Browne, Mrs Ellen Li, Mr Wilson Wang and Dr S. Y. Chung for asking questions of some public importance, instead of fiddling bits of trivia.

It is their questions that deserve verbal answers.

The more pertinent questions included such subjects as pollution in typhoon shelters, the appointment of a new Board of Education, the release of more Army land to the public, publicising the dangers of gas heaters, tests for drivers of goods vehicles.

One wonders incidentally, whether recent graduates from the Urban Council could leave questions on routine affairs in resettlement estates to the other chamber.

Government is very good at telling Urban Councillors to confine themselves to matters within their jurisdiction. The same advice should be given to Legislative Council — if for no other reason than to avoid overlapping.

— R.H.