

A game of bluff only blind men would play

THERE is no real October deadline for the talks. While time may be getting tight, the cut-off date for putting electoral arrangements in place does not come until at least mid-December.

Even that is only for next year's relatively uncontested district board polls, which, despite yesterday's official protestations to the contrary, could easily be settled first.

British officials privately admit the 1995 Legislative Council elections, the real issue at stake at the negotiating table, could still be held on time, even if the talks were allowed to drag on for another 16 months.

Despite this, things have now begun to unravel so fast that it was last week being taken almost for granted that Governor Chris Patten will signal an end to the talks, when he rises to address Legco on October 6.

Such a scenario has been in the background for many months. But, ever since Mr Patten and his team came back from holiday, there has been a determined effort to push it to the forefront of the agenda.

"Tick-tock goes the clock," the Governor told the press on the steps of Government House, while a British press report — with Mr Patten's fingerprints all over it — described the talks as close to breaking down.

But with no real, as opposed to political, deadline behind such a strategy, this bears all the hallmarks of a gigantic game of bluff, that now shows every sign of going badly wrong.



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Officials privately admit that, as in all previous negotiations with Beijing, they do not expect China to make any concessions until the very last moment.

Given that, it makes sense to try to convey the impression that time is running out, regardless of whether it is or not.

With suggestions that there is little time left to get necessary electoral legislation in place sounding a touch lame — the same excuse was used in the run-up to the supposed July 21 deadline, only to be abruptly abandoned — another apparent reason has now been found.

Officials say legislators are getting impatient, and will not be prepared to wait much longer. Yet this sounds equally unlikely, since many councillors are almost desperate to leave the matter in the lap of negotiators, while the few who are not — such as Emily Lau Wai-hing — claim they are being increasingly marginalised by the Government.

However, such rhetoric seems to be believed in Beijing. For what may have begun as a bluff by Britain, aimed at extracting concessions, now seems to have acquired an almost unstoppable momentum, as China last week joined the "talks will break down" bandwagon.

Senior mainland officials privately expressed pessimism about

would announce their failure on October 6, brought a swift denial from the Foreign Office.

British chief negotiator Sir Robin McLaren, perhaps aware that some of the blame for any breakdown would be laid on him, also swiftly denied it.

"We are certain that we are not working for a breakdown. We're working for a successful outcome," he said, on arriving in the territory. The Hong Kong Government, by contrast, remained conspicuously silent about the report.

British officials are also sceptical of Government House's emerging contingency plan for skirting the October 6 minefield, if the negotiations are still limping on then.

This is that Mr Patten can fulfil his pledge to give a detailed account of the negotiations in his policy address, yet avoid openly breaching the secrecy surrounding them, by recounting Britain's stance, without also revealing Beijing's proposals.

"That idea is simply ludicrous," said one Foreign Office source, insisting even this would violate the rules of confidentiality for the talks.

Such arguments will swiftly become irrelevant if the talks break down. But, until then, these fresh signs of differences between Whitehall and Government House will only further complicate the debate over the future of the talks in coming weeks.

And it may lead to some intense discussions during the Cabinet committee expected to be convened — perhaps by telephone — to take the final decision on the issue in the run-up to October 6.