

A duel we cannot win

SOME years ago Margaret Thatcher asked me, as someone who had lived and worked in Beijing and Hong Kong, who she should send as governor of the territory. Whoever it is, I replied, don't send a politician. In Hong Kong we are in the classic British position of having responsibility without power, and it would be wrong to promise things we are in no position to deliver.

British policy in Hong Kong today is worse than a failure: it is immoral. As 1997 approaches, our press and parliamentary opinion seem motivated largely by conscience-salving, which makes rational discussion difficult. The mood of national escapism has reached the point where to dissent from official policy is to be branded an agent of a foreign power. Nevertheless I shall try to dispel some of the myths. Like garbage disposal, someone has to do it.

How can defiance of China in the cause of democracy be immoral? Philosophers have a handy way of deciding these things. You simply examine the aims, means and consequences of an action, and see whether they add up. In the case of the attempt to extend democracy in Hong Kong a few years before China takes over, the means and the consequences of our actions are so questionable that the aim itself has become suspect.

The objective might seem above criticism: to give a greater measure of representative government to a people who, we now discover, should have had it all along. This is the first of the comforting falsehoods that have dominated the discussion. It was never possible to have anything approaching a serious democracy in Hong Kong.

Assume that we had mounted elections, in the teeth of Chinese opposition, on what they see as their territory. There would have been an anti-Beijing party, and the commu-

nists would have seen to it that it was countered by a pro-Beijing party. The result, especially at times of crisis on the mainland, would have been blood on the streets. The murderous riots of 1956 and 1967 were a taste of that. China made it clear years ago that it would see serious moves to democracy as a prelude to the independence of a part of their country.

Another myth fashionable amongst escapologists from the responsibilities of decolonisation is that our policy in Hong Kong since 1949 has been dictated by "Foreign Office mandarins". Leaving aside the question of how the territory has succeeded as well as it has, this puts successive British prime ministers and foreign secretaries in a poor light, not least Lady Thatcher.

Was that notoriously weak-willed woman such putty in the hands of the "mandarins" that she failed to insist on a proper democracy in Hong Kong as part of the Sino-British agreement? Or could it be that, like honest men before her, having examined the realities, she backed away from the risk of sterile confrontation with China?

Of course Lady Thatcher claims to support British policy now, but it is what is done in office that counts.

We are told the approach of the handover to China and the Tiananmen Square massacre have politicised the territory, whether we like it or not. To an extent that is true. How have we set about channeling the democratic aspirations that exist, reflected in the latest Legislative Council vote for reform, faced with the remorseless fact of mainland sovereignty in 1997?

By putting China publicly on the spot. In principle there is nothing wrong with that. We did it in 1967

On Wednesday Chris Patten's electoral bill was tabled in the Legislative Council. Here George Walden, a former British diplomat in Beijing and now a Tory MP, argues that the policies are bound to fail

your "honour" by risking the welfare of others seems of questionable morality. Rather than seeking to bathe our retreat in a heroic light, we should ask ourselves what the effects of our actions are likely to be on others.

So lost in wonderment have we become at our own virtue and daring, that we have overlooked that.

As a result of our actions it is probable that the Chinese communists will be that much more repressive than they would have been anyway. But then think of the resonant speeches we shall be able to make in defence of this democratic politician, that human rights activist, or that free-spoken editor when they are pressured or locked away by the communists. Our policy may not be moral but it is profoundly self-gratifying.

Among our other sudden discoveries are the Hong Kong Chinese plutocrats whose enthusiasm for democracy is tempered by their interest in keeping in with their future masters. A dismal spectacle, to be sure. But these are our much vaunted role models of capitalist enter-

prise, on whose ambivalent relationship with the mainland much of the territory's prosperity has been built. If we didn't want to get our hands dirty, we should never have grabbed Hong Kong in the first place.

When it came up in parliament some years ago, I questioned not the desirability, but the feasibility of democracy. Until now I have avoided criticising our stance publicly, and declined to discuss it in the media. I am all too familiar with the techniques of Chinese propaganda, which will now quote me as saying that our policy is "immoral" while ignoring my argument.

I also find the tone of the British domestic debate — with its facile division between "China hands" and sturdy opponents of communism — tiresome and juvenile.

If I write in strong terms, it is because, like anyone who knows it, I am sentimental about Hong Kong, where I once lived with a Chinese family who taught me Tang poetry in a tenement. Despite everything, I remain optimistic about its future, and I know enough about China to be wary of my own predictions. I would just like to be convinced that our policy is directed to the welfare of the people of Hong Kong, and not to our own moral vanity.

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