

A Governor for transition

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AS Hongkong approaches 1992, few issues facing the territory can be more vital than that of its leadership during the next five years. While the date of transition to Chinese sovereignty is fixed for 1997, the shape and form it will take is being mapped out now, with every day that passes.

It is a process that will continue to gain momentum in the years ahead. And, to borrow words much in vogue among mainland political leaders, stability and continuity at the top will be of paramount importance. There will be quite enough uncertainty around as it is.

Despite the assurances of British Prime Minister John Major that there is no vacancy at Government House, the word from Whitehall suggests that the search is on in earnest to find a replacement for the present incumbent, Sir David Wilson.

The reasons are as speculative as the names being whispered around the tables of the House of Commons tearoom. Sir David himself has hinted he will not be Governor in 1997, and his time in the job will reach a landmark five years next March. Then there is the forthcoming British General Election, which may settle the question once and for all with a switch in power at Westminster.

No-one can dispute that Sir David's tenure at Upper Albert Road has been a testing one. He has presided over the territory's mercurial fortunes with consummate assurance and calm through stock market crashes, Tiananmen Square, the battle for an airport agreement and the first democratic elections.

Indeed, the results of an opinion poll conducted for the *Sunday Morning Post* and carried in today's edition show a commendable 53 per cent approve of his administration's handling of relations with China, while 63 per cent say their views on the Government have improved or at least remained stable during 1991. This despite a bruising agenda of controversial issues over the past 12 months.

But that same poll carries with it an implicit warning. Those questioned do not feel, as some have suggested, that Legco is becoming too confrontational, either where matters involving the mainland are concerned or when they take on Government. It can be seen as something of a vote of confidence in the council's new-found independence.

According to some observers of the British political scene, the feeling is growing that, while Sir David's adept diplomatic hand was the right one for the helm when deals on Hongkong were being hammered out behind closed doors in London and Beijing, the man for the next five years must possess skills of a very different kind. Perhaps foremost among them must be the ability to carry the territory's hearts and minds across the threshold of transition to a future with China.

They are the skills not just of a career diplomat and respected sinologist, but of a political figure able to cut a convincing figure at a business conference, a Mongkok market or a meeting in the Great Hall of the People. They are skills not easily found either in the Foreign Office or Parliament.

The tasks ahead for any Governor are formidable. There is not just the job of reconciling newly elected Legislative Councillors' high expectations to the realities of their role, and of reconciling Beijing to the fact of their existence. There is also the unenviable job of remaining credible while most important issues on the future of Hongkong are still decided in London and Beijing and when the interests of the people of Hongkong may coincide with neither of them.

Whoever moves into Government House will have to satisfy Britain, reassure China, meet the aspirations of a more demanding populace, inspire an increasingly worried civil service and security staff, work with an increasingly defiant Legislative Council and ease the sometimes fevered anxieties of large business corporations and investors.

The field for such a demanding job description is limited. But it is to be earnestly hoped that any search for a new Governor will be conducted with the interests of the people of Hongkong, rather than those of domestic political expediency, uppermost in the minds of those involved.