

A questionable role for the Governor

DOES Chris Patten still serve a useful purpose as the Governor of Hong Kong in the countdown to 1997?

This academic question has become increasingly popular within the circles of politicians, observers and even government officials, since Mr Patten was dubbed the "offshore" Governor.

It is also being asked whether his heart is with Hong Kong, or whether he has an agenda of his own in preparation for his later political career.

The survey findings published in the *Post* this week have reinforced the impression that Mr Patten has perhaps already become a spent force in the territory.

Almost half of the 400 residents polled said there was no useful job to do during the closing chapter of British colonial rule.

Mr Patten has boasted time and again that he and John Major are so close that one could not even put a tissue paper between them.

Mr Major, now the most unpopular head of government in contemporary British history, has difficulty in even taming the Tory backbenchers.

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Mr Major on British domestic politics, rather than seeking instructions on Hong Kong issues.

Even if Mr Major could survive the remainder of his normal term of office, there is no sign that Hong Kong would benefit from the comradeship between the two.

The local community has been campaigning for the handful of widows of veterans of the British forces to be granted right of abode in the United Kingdom.

Hopes were high when Mr Patten took up office as the 28th Governor of Hong Kong in 1992, because of his supposed influence in Whitehall. That has turned out to be wishful thinking.

In a recent motion debate, legislators urged the Government to try again to convince Britain to recognise the rights of the 2.8 million Brit-

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ish subjects in Hong Kong to full British passports. That demand has, of course, also fallen on deaf ears.

Meanwhile, local emotions have been running high after the Government's abrupt decision to release 125 boat people Hanoi had refused to accept.

Political pressure is mounting for Britain to fulfil its duties as the current sovereign power of Hong Kong by promising to accommodate all boat people, regardless of their immigration status, still stranded in the territory in 1997.

At the latest count, there were around 24,000 in the various camps for boat people. The Security Branch has been at pains to stress the number has been halved since mid-1992.

The Government, however, is reluctant to admit that the so-called orderly repatriation programme has been losing steam. Officials have already back-pedalled on their pledge to have the problem resolved by the end of 1995.

If the Governor could not even persuade London to be compassionate towards the small group of Hong Kong war widows, it is hard to imagine Britain embracing the Vietnamese boat people.

It even remains unknown whether Mr Patten has actually pursued the issues with the battered Prime Minister.

On the local front, Mr Patten's own popularity has been on the decline. A *Sunday Morning Post* opinion poll indicates that the Chief Secretary, Mrs Anson Chan Fang On-sang, has inspired more confidence than her superior.

Officials have been selling their policy proposals on transport and old age pensions rather confidently to the people, without any help from the Governor.

Meanwhile, the latest shake-up in the top echelon of the administration has seen Mr Bowen Leung Powing and Mr Peter Lai Hing-ling identified with Mr Patten and his political reform package, elevated to secretary postings.

Article 101 of the Basic Law for the future Special Administrative Region (SAR) stipulates that "only Chinese citizens among permanent residents of the Region with no right of

abode in any foreign country may fill the following posts: the Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries of Departments, Director of Bureaux, Commissioner Against Corruption, Director of Audit, Commissioner of Police, Director of Immigration and Commissioner of Customs and Excise".

There are about 40 such top level Government positions that will be affected by this clause. About two-thirds of the posts are already occupied by officials who meet the nationality stipulation.

Mr Patten's fingerprints are all over the unilateral list of officials that the Hong Kong Government wants to survive the 1997 change-over. Beijing is adamant that it will not discuss personnel changes with the British Hong Kong authorities, lest it infringe on both Chinese sovereignty and the autonomy of the future SAR.

Irrespective of China's position, Mr Patten has already settled on his own line-up for the consideration of the Chinese authorities.

The Governor is regarded by many as an obstacle rather than a facilitator in seeking Chinese co-operation over the remaining transition issues. That may explain why some people, government officials included, would like to see Mr Patten on the move more often.

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There might be more room for political manoeuvre with the Chinese authorities if the Governor were conveniently out of town.

Mr Patten, of course, is eager to dispel the impression that he has been away from Hong Kong frequently. His information aides have noted that the previous Governor, Lord Wilson, also went on a similar number of business trips.

What the officials have not pointed out is that while Lord Wilson often headed north for China, Mr Patten has only managed one trip to Beijing since his arrival.

Mr Patten has made it clear that he has no plan to quit Hong Kong until June 30, 1997. However, the question on people's minds now centres on whether he should go, rather than whether he thinks he should stay.