

## Advisers delivering honest opinions



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**H**ong Kong's business leaders have good reason to resent the remarks Governor Chris Patten recently made about what they say and do not say to the Chinese Government.

To appease the anger of those who felt insulted, Mr Patten denied having actually used the word "betrayal" when he was talking, during his trip to the United States, about what businessmen were doing to Hong Kong.

But the accusation he made in the *Newsweek* interview was unmistakable. He claimed that Hong Kong businessmen were aiding and abetting the Chinese Government in crimes against the interests of Hong Kong.

This is not the first time Mr Patten has lashed out at business leaders in the territory. He said similar things in an earlier interview with the *Daily Telegraph*. According to the Governor, the tycoons knew perfectly well what made Hong Kong tick, and they could see that the Chinese Government was doing harmful things to the Hong Kong system. But they did not care to speak up for the interests of Hong Kong, because they all had foreign passports.

On both occasions the comments were made to a foreign journalist, and no doubt intended for readers abroad who have little chance of hearing alternative views. To people living in Hong Kong the allegations hardly sound plausible.

Who would care more about the long-term interests of Hong Kong? Local business leaders who have everything to gain and nothing to lose if Hong Kong maintains its prosperity? Or a British governor who is quitting the territory for good in a few hundred days?

Perhaps it has never occurred to Mr Patten that the businessmen among China's advisers have always given China their honest views on Hong Kong affairs. Perhaps the Governor cannot come to terms with the fact that the businessmen, and many others living here, honestly disagree with him.

Local businessmen should understand the importance of a level playing field, says Mr Patten. In fact, what they understand about the level playing field is that it never existed in the not too-long-gone days when the executive and legislative councils were dominated by the representatives of British hongts.

Now that British rule is coming to an end there is a much better chance of the playing field becoming more level. Apparently, those who have taken advantage of a lopsided playing field in the past and know they cannot continue to do so, are eager to make sure that it will not remain there for others to benefit from. Hence there is always a suggestion of hypocrisy in the Governor's lectures on the subject.

Similarly for democracy. Mr Patten suggests that businessmen should appreciate the value of a democratic government in maintaining economic prosperity. But does the history of Hong Kong's past "success" prove that prosperity must go hand in hand with democracy? Mr Patten's predecessors made effective efforts to show that it need not be the case.

**I**f the performance of the present Legislative Council is an illustration of how democracy works, the business community is obviously not impressed. Mr Patten wants business leaders to tell the Chinese Government they should not refuse to listen to some of the popularly elected legislators.

The businessmen are not giving such advice to Beijing; many of them share the hostility of Chinese officials towards these Hong Kong politicians.

The fact that Mr Patten chose to condemn local businessmen through the foreign press indicates a breakdown of communication between him and those he censured. Has the Governor, who persistently tells the Chinese to listen to dissenting views, ever listened to dissenting views from the local business community?