

A man of many colours

INTERVIEW

Foreign labels fall wide of the mark when tagged to Henry Tang, one of the more progressive founder members of the Liberal Party, writes Kevin Sinclair



EVERYBODY likes Henry Tang. Even those on the far side of the Hong Kong political spectrum respect the businessman with liberal notions. Although wealthy textile magnate Tang Ying-yen is a founder member of the conservative-leaning Liberal Party, he speaks passionately about the need for our society to care for and help the underprivileged.

Chatting about social problems with the American-educated, Hong Kong-born son of a Shanghaiese knitwear tycoon, you could as well be listening to the views of some Legislative Council member labelled neatly as a raging progressive. Indeed, on matters like pension plans, he comes across with a message similar to Christine Loh Kung-wai, generally perceived as a leading member of the reformist ranks.

Once again, it's an example of how convoluted are Hong Kong's politics and how difficult – and dangerous – it is to stick foreign labels on people; what might be considered a “liberal” in Britain, for instance,

hardly has the same connotation as here.

Henry Tang was put into Legco in 1991 by Lord Wilson, a year earlier than Ms Loh. He has a lot more in common with her than many might think, although broadly speaking they are seen as being on opposite sides of the political fence.

Both are foreign educated, tough-minded business people. Both hold dear Hong Kong's rich recent past that has led to our incredible prosperity. Both worry about the future for very similar reasons and both care deeply about erecting a safety net to help the unfortunate.

Yet Christine Loh – quite deservedly – is the darling of the small liberals while Henry Tang is largely – most unfairly – overlooked or regarded as merely another millionaire mouthpiece for big business.

Not so. Another similarity is that both appointed Legco members are determined utterly to stand for election in 1995. Just as the rest of the community are confused and uncertain about the structure of the ballot, so are these two candidates.

“I don't know if I'll stand in the Chamber of Commerce functional constituency or in some other FC or in a geographical seat,” says Henry Tang. “But I will be standing.” Although he has been chosen by fellow members of such organisations as the Federation of Industries and knitwear and woollen associations, his first real test at battling for election comes next month. Then, Henry Tang will stand for the committee of the Hong Kong General Chamber

of Commerce.

This will be a dress rehearsal; if he does well, it will augur favourably for his chance in 1995 to contest the Legco Chamber seat now held by popular Jimmy McGregor.

From his spacious office in Tsim Sha Tsui where he is managing director of family-controlled Peninsula Knitters, Henry Tang looks out on a city that has changed greatly since his boyhood.

“My father was a very liberal parent,” he recalls. “He let me choose what I wanted to study.” At first, that was mathematics at University of Michigan. But after a year he switched his major to sociology.

“What was I going to do for a job if I kept on with math?” he asked himself. The answer was narrow; be a math teacher. He wanted something more and sociology was fascinating. He continued the subject as a postgraduate at Yale, but after only a year there, his father “drafted” him home to help in the family business.

That was in 1978 when gates to China were being thrown wide open. Peninsula joined other manufacturers in the great industrial exodus to China. There's a major factory back in Shanghai (the ancestral hometown is Wuxi) which accounts partly for Henry Tang's seat on Shanghai's advisory council. At the same time, his father, Tang Hsiang-chien, is a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee.

Although Henry Tang is vice chairman of the Business and Professional Federation (another body on which people slap on labels –

“pro-Beijing” and “conservative” being but two) he is far from the common idea of an industrialist who cares only for the bottom line. Take just one aspect of hidden problems facing our community; the elderly.

He has adopted their situation as a cause. “The number of old people will double by 2007,” he warns. “One major concern facing us is how to provide a workable old age pension system.”

“Proposals made by government are not specific. Will it be income tested? Will the rich get it? We've had no details of what it will be.

“I'm under no illusions; there will be a redistribution of wealth, in some form. “There's got to be a proposal we can judge on its merits. The Government is dreaming if it thinks I will come out and support any pension scheme that will be a liability to be borne by the SAR administration after 1997.” Some pension and welfare plans are “time-bombs” that tick quietly away in a society until, decades later, they blow up in economic or financial disarray; he points to the American welfare system as an example.

Is there any other society we can look at and emulate in our search for an example? “Why should we copy others?” he asks.

“Look at our economy, there's no other like it. Our *laissez-faire* system has created an open economic system with a level playing field for all. It's vibrant.

“We've set precedents in shaping our economy. So why shouldn't we set precedents in coming up with a

system that can take care of our elderly?” His ideas are radical. There could be a pension plan for those who get reasonable money and can afford to contribute. But there should also be provisions for those who face a bleak future and who cannot afford to pay into such a plan, with payment fuelled by general government revenues which could be claimed only by those in genuine need.

“Hong Kong is a very, very lucky place,” he adds. Fair policies – including education in which he plays a direct role as a member of the University and Polytechnics Grants Committee – have provided opportunities not just for work but for rapid upward mobility.

He admits to be worried about continuing friction between Britain and China over our future. Can the economic partnership keep flourishing if the political relationship remains bitterly strained? He hopes so.

“We've got to get our infrastructure in place, stock exchange, banking controls, ports, airport, transport, then let business people get on with doing their job. Let government provide the framework, then the businessmen will do the rest.” Could Shanghai pose a challenge to our supremacy? He doubts it; not, at least, for years. We've got our infrastructure largely in place. They do not have, and it will take a long time for them to catch up.

“The hardware is the easy part,” he contends. “You can put up a hotel, but it's not five-star unless it's got the right staff. You can build a telephone exchange, but you have to have the trained people to run it.” He admits to concern about political problems and hopes, somehow, they can be overcome.

“I'm an optimist,” he says. “I hope economic progress can be separated from political problems. “If we are not successful economically, we would merely be a backwater and then nobody would care about us.”