

Forward with Hongkong

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Accident highlights need for balance

IF society expresses itself through its institutions, the social critics tell us, then the message we have been receiving in Hongkong is particularly brutal. By assembling at regular intervals and making earnest pronouncements about the heavy price this community has to pay, in social terms, for its prosperity, would-be reformers have over the years persuaded many people here of the need for a radical re-structuring of Hongkong's non-interventionist economic system.

The social critics have been especially active here lately following the death of a 64-year-old bus driver who suffered a stroke at the wheel of his vehicle. Although none of the bus passengers were injured, a coroner, Mr David Duggan, told an inquest jury: "The potential for harm to passengers of a bus driver having a stroke at the wheel of his bus is very great, especially on our busy streets."

The inquest was informed that the China Motor Bus Company vehicle driven by Wong Tui was travelling along To Kwa Wan Road in Kowloon last November when he collapsed. He died four days later.

It was revealed that, at the time of the incident, CMB provided annual check-ups for drivers over 60. But Mr Wong did not have a medical file opened on him because he had never taken sick leave, although a pathologist found that he had been suffering from high blood pressure.

After Mr Wong's death, CMB lowered the age for annual check-ups to 50. In returning a verdict of death by natural causes, the jury recommended that CMB should review its current procedures to ensure that all drivers aged 50 and older are examined once a year.

This is a matter that should concern us all. It is quite outrageous that there has, in the past, been no requirement for regular health checks for veteran bus drivers. We all know that Hongkong's transportation woes are as frustrating as a traffic jam and as inevitable as a red light. And we can no longer turn a blind eye to the fact that we may have been paying more attention to the "health" of bus engines than

to the physical well-being of the man behind the wheel.

Traffic experts contend, rightly, that bad road conditions, traffic congestion and human frailty are all contributing factors to the recent spate of road accidents involving public transport. There is little doubt that some of our roads, especially those in the satellite towns, rank among the worst in the industrialised world.

Safety and health are equally important considerations in the industrial sector. And that's why members of the Legislative Council marked Labour Day at the beginning of this month by voicing their concern about the safety, health and welfare of the working community. The Government was urged to set up an inter-departmental steering committee to review its policy on occupational health and safety.

While this should please the social critics in our midst, there are many in this community who believe that industry itself should take the responsibility for providing a safer and healthier working environment.

Opponents of a wider Government role in such matters attribute the territory's successes to the flexibility of private enterprise unhampered by excessive intervention from the administration. And in fact, the policy of *laissez faire*, which the Government likes to call "positive non-interventionism", can be credited with a large part of Hongkong's present-day prosperity. But we must not be over-protective of the non-interventionist principles of the past at the expense of the well-being of today's citizens.

It's important to review such matters as hazard prevention measures, disability assessment and compensation and rehabilitation programmes. But we must never forget that only the delicate balance between healthy industry and well-cared-for labour can guarantee a fair deal for the workingman and a future of stable prosperity for Hongkong.