

A new pattern on the way for some uncivil servants

IT'S been Chris Patten's recurring theme from the day he was given the tenancy of the white colonial pile at Upper Albert Road.

But, not surprisingly, the gospel of open government is yet to seep into the collective skulls of the folks over at the GIS.

Accountability and accessibility be damned – such words do not exist in *their* book.

All dictionaries at its Beaconsfield House eyrie have had the pages containing such words torn off many moons ago.

For far too long these nerds of negativism – rooted in the ways of Hongkong BC (Before Chris!) – have had an easy ride.

Obstructive, contemptuous and, at times, downright rude – all these traits were on ample display to those of us given the task of covering Mr Patten's arrival in the territory.

The instances of *accredited* journalists and photographers being shepherded into buses and boats by GIS minders and kept well away from the scene of the action is the stuff of local media legend.

But how about the first informal press conference arranged on the lawn of Government House the next day?

Flanked by chief *spinmeister* Irene Yau and with a phalanx of GIS lackeys oozing with self-importance standing by, Mr Patten strode forward to greet the assembled snappers and journos in what is expected to be the informal style of the new era.

But the GIS, which – to use the language of a family newspaper – couldn't organise a booze-up in a brewery, managed to flunk that one wonderfully well.

The Governor was met by a duo of microphones that didn't work. And the attendant ranks of the GIS – never previously having to deal with anything that wasn't sanitised or manipulated – stood frozen in its incompetence.

A day earlier at City Hall, a journalist seeking to position himself just two metres from his appointed position (and without being in the way of anybody) to get a better view of the proceedings was ordered back by a GIS minder

with the admonition that "You are not a guest, only a reporter".

This same obnoxious fellow then berated some journalists for using mobile phones, completely missing the point that in these days of instant news gathering, a cellular phone is as much a legitimate journalistic tool as a pen and notebook.

Ironically, while trying to lay down that spurious law with one finger-wagging hand, the GIS henchman himself was holding a mobile telephone with the other.

When I pointed out this slight discrepancy to him, he shot back that *his* was switched off. Which begged the question as to why he was flaunting it around like a teenage poseur on the MTR!

The GIS has fast got to come to terms with the fact that the days of dealing with a subservient press represented by meek and submissive journalists are over.

Hongkong is a vital hub in the global communications village. And the international media, together with the local media who now make up the news beat, demand to be treated with professional re-

spect. To tarnish everyone at the Government Information Services with the same brush would, of course, be grossly unfair. There are some commendable operators within its ranks – Peter Moss, Paul Brown, Mark Pinkstone, Peter Randall – to name but a few.

But unless this bloated department is streamlined and brought into line with the new Governor's edict of raising the standards of public service and making more information available (it's all there, Mrs Yau, in the Citizen's Charter), I can see the GIS being the spanner in the works of Mr Patten's avowed intent to open up the corridors of power.

Secured by their iron Weetabix bowls, these pampered civil servants have operated within a cosy and protective cabal, administering the affairs of Hongkong while enjoying ever more kudos and job security.

It's time for Mr Patten to order that they resume their proper role as servants of the people. And those who are found wanting should be turfed out to earn a living on the roller-coaster of the real world.

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST
13 JUL 1992