

# A BNO passport to nowhere?

The British Dependent Territories Citizen passport was never notable as the travel document of choice; its successor, the British National Overseas (BNO) passport is even less appealing in many ways. Yet, it appears there are new depths to which its lack of usefulness can plummet.

The 71 countries that currently allow BNO passport holders visa-free entry are saying they will not guarantee a continuation of this practice after China resumes sovereignty in 1997. The hard work devoted to gaining recognition for the lacklustre BNO passport will, therefore, have been in vain. More importantly, Hong Kong people traveling overseas will find themselves treated as the lepers of the international community.

The reluctance to maintain the current status of the BNO passport stems from China's refusal to join Britain in promoting recognition of the BNO

passport alongside the yet-to-be-issued Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Hong Kong travel document.

It is not surprising that third countries are reluctant to bestow full status on a travel document which does not appear to have the support of the sovereign power presiding over the home country of the holder. This would leave the majority of Hong Kong people with the dubious privilege of travelling under the auspices of their SAR passport which, presumably, will have the same international status as a People's Republic of China passport, another travel document - also not generally regarded as the document of choice.

Yet, in the Chinese memorandum, attached to the 1984 Joint Declaration, China unambiguously states Beijing will "permit Chinese nationals in Hong Kong who were previously called 'British Dependent Terr-

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itories citizens' to use travel documents issued by the government of the United Kingdom for the purpose of travelling to other states and regions".

Unlike many issues raised in the Joint Declaration, this one is clear enough. Having made the commitment, China is obliged to give it some substance. At the

very least, the Chinese government should make the effort to remind other countries of its intention to honour and support these British-issued travel documents.

However, such a step would probably require joint meetings with British representatives. Meetings of this kind are

infrequent and rarely productive nowadays.

China is in the business of "punishing" Britain for its allegedly improper behaviour in promoting a modest expansion of democratic government.

In practice, the only people being punished are the people of Hong Kong, whose well-established freedom to travel will be undermined.

Does anyone in the Chinese government seriously believe that a single British politician will lose a moment's sleep because Hong Kong people's travel plans will be seriously disrupted?

Anyone who does is severely misinformed about British concerns. The truth of the matter is Britain would have been more than happy to totally wash its hands of all responsibility for people in Hong Kong. There is certainly no groundswell of opinion in favour of conferring

even a fig leaf of British citizenship on Hong Kong people.

If this is not understood in Beijing, it should be. The campaign to bring Britain to its knees for its current transgressions is completely misguided. This entire passport business only serves to emphasise just how misguided and pointless it is.

We could list a host of other issues in which China is punishing Hong Kong instead of Britain. It would include the impasse on the airport, the lack of agreement on the future of the civil service, and the future of the container ports. China can, and does, argue that all these matters are somehow more in Britain's interest than Hong Kong's. The grounds for this line of reasoning are pretty obscure, but no doubt discernible by experts.

The question of passports, however, cannot possibly be

explained to be of advantage to anyone but the people of Hong Kong. At a push, employing the utmost powers of paranoia, China might suggest that the retention of the BNO passport is an instrument for perpetuating British influence.

However, those who are less inclined towards paranoia, will find this argument hard to swallow. This leaves us with the sad fact that the people of Hong Kong will continue to be the meat in the sandwich as the two sovereigns wage war against the other, confident in the knowledge they each have far less to lose than their subjects in what used to be known as the colony.

The time has come for a glimmer of light. Surely, it is not too much to ask that a simple matter of sorting out travel documents be undertaken without immersion in the mire of heavy politics.

Or are we are being naive?

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