

A major social change for HK

The Legislative Council debate yesterday on a major item of social reform affecting Hongkong industry drew widely divergent opinions from the Unofficials, and employers can hardly argue that their representations were not given full and fair consideration.

If in the long run the outcome can be chalked up as a modest victory for employees it remains to be seen how the ordinance granting seven consecutive days leave works out in practice.

Employers seemed excessively concerned with two provisions, the first being the need for some restraint on employees taking other work during their holidays and the second being the lack of sufficient recreational facilities to enable workers to enjoy a holiday.

The first objection arose because the legislation does not allow employees to opt to continue working for additional pay during their period of paid leave at their place of employment.

Some Unofficials argued therefore that a provision should be included to stop other employers engaging them during this period ostensibly because it might lead to employees changing jobs and thus resulting in an excessive turnover of labour. They also felt that if paid leave were to be authorised then the Government should ensure that the employee actually took his holiday rather than made it an occasion to earn extra pay, thus defeating one of the main objects of the legislation.

It would, however, amount to a gross and completely unwarranted interference on the part of Government to dictate how a person should spend his holidays.

The original intention was to prevent an employer persuading an employee to forgo his leave and continue working, and this objective will be achieved.

But if an employee takes paid leave and decides to spend part of his time working, either redecorating his own home, watching over his wife's vegetable stall or doing odd jobs either for the community or for remuneration, that must be his own business.

It is well known that many civil servants and private business employees on old six-month home-leave terms worked during their holiday because of sheer boredom.

It is hardly likely that any employee is going to be bored by being a week away from work, but how he spends his time must be left to his own personal choice.

Let it be acknowledged that relatively few will be able to afford the luxury of a trip overseas. But for the majority who take it outside major public holidays such as Lunar New Year, there will be an opportunity to visit Ocean Park, some of our Country Parks and New Territories recreation areas, our many beaches, Cheung Chau, Lamma and Lantau; they will be able to take ferry or train or bus rides; they will have a chance to explore their own territory in greater depth than ever before.

Not too long ago there were people living in Kowloon who had never crossed the water to Hongkong. How many thousands more have never visited the islands?

There is not very much one can do in a week anyway and possibly most employees will be able to afford only day outings. But if the demand for more and better recreation facilities grows Hongkong businessmen will step in to provide them.

Undoubtedly smaller employers will feel the pinch of providing paid leave more than large employers, but at a cost of 2.3 per cent a year to the wages bill this is a step Hongkong can no longer avoid taking.

Our employers must moreover recognise that this is only one of many improvements which will have to be conceded to an increasingly prosperous and well-educated work force who will be looking for the same benefits as their counterparts in other parts of Asia.