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A bad week for the confidence index 18-3

IN rejecting proposals for a new debate about the Daya Bay project, Legislative Council members have thrown away an opportunity to achieve three important goals. They could have used the debate to add their collective authority to demands for fuller disclosure of details about the financial and safety aspects of the project; they could have clearly demonstrated their commitment to making sure the voice of Hongkong was heard; and they could have underlined the community's displeasure at the way China has chosen to ignore its views.

Instead, by rejecting a new debate at the same time as they accepted an invitation to Beijing to have the project explained to them, they have signalled that they have no intention of doing anything to embarrass the future rulers of this territory, even if that means doing less than justice to a campaign which has united the ordinary people of this territory as no other issue has ever done.

There now appears to be no opportunity of obtaining fuller details of the financing and safety aspects of the project before contracts are signed later this month. Legco Unofficials have instead chosen to act as accomplices of the Chinese Government, which has shown itself insensitive to the views of the one million people who signed a petition to protest against the scheme.

The Unofficials had a choice: to act as true representatives of the people of Hongkong or to meekly submit to Beijing's will. They have chosen the latter, and in doing so have reassured Beijing that the Chinese Government has little to fear from representative government as it now stands in Hongkong.

The issue has by now transcended the economic and safety concerns of the Daya Bay plant in itself. It must now be seen in a political light, with implications just as potentially harmful as a leaky reactor would be.

Confidence in the future is based on the assumption that when China

recovers sovereignty, Hongkong will not simply become another Shanghai, but will instead retain the characteristics which make it unique. That is what the Sino-British Joint Declaration, whose second anniversary is approaching, is all about.

As a party to that agreement, China was demonstrating its commitment to the one country, two systems concept. It has continued to do so, in theory at least, in the drawing up of the Basic Law. Yet when the mutual respect that this concept implies is put to its first major practical test, the Chinese Government has so far been unwilling to concede an inch to the wishes of the people of Hongkong.

It is no good arguing that this special relationship will not come into effect until after midnight on June 30, 1997; the ties between Hongkong and China which will be formalised then are already evolving. Certainly as far as the people of this territory are concerned, China's actions now will be taken as an indicator of the likely workability of the arrangements after that date.

This has been a bad week for any "confidence index". Before Legco Unofficials waved the white flag on the Daya Bay front, *Business Post* broke the news of Dairy Farm's eagerness to seek a foothold overseas. The hong which only recently published a book extolling its past ties with Hongkong is clearly hedging its bets about its future here, and whatever financial justification the Bermuda gambit enjoys, it amounts to another attempt by a major company to secure an escape route.

The one consolation to be drawn from the Legco collapse is that by extending an invitation to the Unofficials, Beijing is also offering – for the first time – de facto recognition of their status as representatives of the community. We can only hope that the Unofficials will exploit this sign of favour as much as possible when they head north in a few days time.