

SATURDAY, MAY 3, 1986

A day in the sun costs you more

In the next few months, at weekends and holidays, thousands of Hongkong people will head for the beaches or boats to make the most of one of the most popular natural assets we have — the sea. We are privileged to have it on our doorstep and within easy reach of all parts of the territory.

In the Legislative Council this week, the Financial Secretary, Sir John Bremridge, however, cast gloom on boat owners by introducing the second reading of a Bill to regularise the setting of fees, charges and port dues, as proposed in the Budget before last. These were challenged at the time and the Government subsequently rescinded them and the Bill now before Legco is intended to clarify the Government's authority to impose such charges.

In short, the Government intends to restore the former charges and to give itself the right to impose charges to cover the rising costs of administering and policing the waters of Hongkong. Most, if not all boat owners will agree that good administration is as essential for the waterways as for the highways, and there can be no suggestion that a largely affluent minority who own boats should not make a fair contribution to these costs.

The big argument will always be over the division of those charges and what constitutes a fair levy on those who own pleasure boats as against those who operate commercial vessels, both domestic and foreign.

The increasing costs of administration are not questioned; the application of the higher charges will, however, be carefully scrutinised, and the Government must listen to the criticism and reach a fair solution.

In an age when more and more are using the sea for recreational purposes it is not the intention to penalise those which run boats to benefit the deprived or the young. Outward Bound and the Scouts were named on Wednesday as being among the organisations which will have fees rebated, or subsidised. There may well be others concerned with training people in the ways of seamanship and the proper handling of small vessels which deserve to be excluded. Each must be considered on its merits.

However, higher costs will also encourage boat-users to step up criticisms of the state of the inshore waters which are today more polluted with rubbish and waste than ever before.

Much of it is surface rubbish and unsightly rather than toxic or harmful, though the natural flow of tides through the harbour is no longer able to clear the volume of muck dumped into our waters to our great detriment. Increasingly this will kill off marine life. Greater efforts must be made both to instil more disciplined habits and cleaner practices in boat-dwellers, to punish offenders and to clear the daily load of debris.

Only this week, the Government announced the setting up of a maritime rescue co-ordination centre under the Marine Department. While this is a very much diluted version of the independent search and rescue centre proposed by a Marine Court of Inquiry into the sinking of the *Csprey* in a typhoon in September, 1983, it nevertheless represents a more sensible use of resources.

A full-time centre manned around the clock to handle emergencies for only an occasional few hours is not an effective way of using manpower. It will be less costly but hopefully no less effective to rely on an emergency co-ordination centre in times of storm and stress in helping vessels in distress.

This is one way in which the Government is trying to improve the facilities of a harbour that is still busy in spite of the decline of the large fleet of sailing junks and sampans in recent years and the concentration of international movements of freight in container ships. Hongkong is still one of the world's busiest ports and its reputation for efficiency and quick turnrounds cannot become a charge on the general taxpayer, but must be passed to the users who derive the main benefits. That means small boat owners as well as trawler operators and major shipping concerns.