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A boost for localisation

Hongkong's localisation effort is moving from a slow crawl to a smart trot. This week saw the naming of the first Commissioner of Correctional Services from the ranks of local officers. Mr Chan Wa-sek comes to the job with high credentials and his appointment deserves wide acclaim.

For while he is not by any means the first Chinese to reach the directorate rank, he is the first Chinese to be appointed head of one of our major disciplined services. (Another "local" officer, Mr Harnam Grewal, was earlier appointed to head the customs service.) That may be a reflection on the over-rigid attitudes of our administration over many years, but having decided that localisation must be implemented more speedily, it is timely that Mr Chan should be awarded this demanding and responsible job.

We shall undoubtedly be told that Mr Chan achieved his post through no other consideration than a combination of ability, experience, and leadership qualities. We are certain he is well versed in every respect. He has been deputy commissioner since 1980 and Mr Tom Garner is undoubtedly concerned to find the best possible candidate for the job, knowing that he himself comes from a long line of highly efficient and effective prison administrators.

So the announcement of Mr Chan's appointment can be seen not as a political sop to localisation but as the choice of the best man for the job. And no doubt, we shall hear the mandarins of Lower Albert Road aver that all the local appointees who are moving into top positions are not in any way "political sops" but the culmination of a long, carefully planned policy which would have happened anyway.

If such a claim is made, we would have strong reservations in accepting it. Localisation has moved like a tortoise over the years and while there is undoubtedly a core of outstanding local officers in key positions and waiting for top appointments today, had not 1997 been such a compelling consideration the plums would have fallen more slowly. It needed the winds of change to shake the boughs.

We look forward to more such appointments in the Chief Secretary's next tranche and while we would not wish to see eligible younger expatriate officers lose their chance of promotion, the frequent extension of older officers who though in their prime have passed their expected retirement age, is unacceptable. However good and loyal their service, no one is indispensable. Younger men and women must be given their chance to fill the most senior posts.