

# A dangerous increase

FOR ALL that was said in and out of the Urban Council on the increase in the hawkers licence fee, there was little debate as the council voted on the subject yesterday.

But for the two members who abstained from voting — and probably the three who did not attend the meeting — many councillors came with their minds made up and read their written speeches. Consequently many of the interesting points raised by others remained unanswered as the council voted for the fee increase by a 13 to six margin.

It appears that the move to increase the licence fee has caused a good deal of confusion in the minds of some councillors. (What else could be the reasons for Mr Tsin Tsai-nin's decision to withdraw from his earlier plan to second the motion seeking the fee increase and finally vote against it?) This is understandable in view of the complexity of the issue and the extreme difficulty in supervising hawkers' activities.

But what was even more confusing was that a section of the council was obviously in a hurry to have the motion voted on yesterday. Had they not been so there would have been at least an effort to determine whether the proposal made by Mr Tsin, as well as Mr Hilton Cheong-Leen, to delay the move for a while and wait, as Mr Tsin suggested, for the Hawker Select Committee to conduct a detailed study on the matter. Since the vast majority of hawker licences are not expected to become due for renewal before next April, and since the council is expected to end the current financial year with nearly \$30 million surplus, the logic behind ignoring this proposal is obscure. And by approving the fee increase under such clouds the council may be marking the beginning of a new but not necessarily desirable turn in the hawker issue rather than finding any solution for the existing problems.

Some councillors seem to entertain an utopian philosophy that most — if not all — the funds required to maintain the hawker control force must come from hawkers. If this thinking is to become policy, then we will soon be demanding that all our hospitals, schools, recreational facilities, etc., must become self-supporting.

What is ironic is that the decision to increase the licence fee in effect will be seen as a punishment for those who have been trying to make a living through legal means as opposed to the countless illegal hawkers. And the new policy may well force some licensed hawkers not to renew their licences and to become illegal hawkers who are now being condoned and protected by the Urbco.