

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCEA Demand for Political Change in Hong Kong

This open letter has been sent to the British Foreign Secretary, Dr. David Owen, by Urban Councillors Elsie Elliot, CBE; Dr. Denny Huang and Tsin Sai-nin:

On June 24 1978, the undersigned, being elected independent Urban Councillors in Hongkong holding the highest proportion of votes in elections, wrote to Lord Goronwy-Roberts, pointing out the undemocratic system of Government in Hongkong, and requesting certain reforms.

Lord Goronwy-Roberts replied on August 1 1978. While agreeing that "the British Government share your concern that Hongkong should be administered in the interests of all who live there," he added that the problem was to decide "what is appropriate and when."

The tone of Lord Goronwy-Roberts' letter is what now seems to have become typical of the Labour Government: to admit how things should be done, but make excuses for not doing it. In this respect the Labour Government in no way differs from Conservative governments since 1843 when the Colony was first set up. From that time until now, some excuse has always been found to delay reforms as being "inappropriate". If you will read the political history of the Colony, this will prove the point.

We suggest that the time will never be appropriate for changes, so long as the British Government continues to cater only for big business interests, and disregards injustices to the people as a whole.

The Hongkong Government will no doubt explain to you (and your predecessors have always accepted these explanations without question) that the people are consulted on every issue at every level. Advisory Committees are set up and Green Papers circulated to back up this claim. But in actual fact, no advice of an advisory committee or criticism of a Green Paper is accepted unless it coincides, more or less, with the views of the Executive and Legislative Councils, which are made up of appointees known for their interest in preserving the status quo. No strong voice for the people's interests has ever been heard on those Councils, and it is clear from the omissions in appointments as well as from the actual appointments, that only pro-Government interests are elevated to the law-making bodies.

We have followed with interest your activities in the Western Hemisphere, especially in Africa. We agree with your stand in Rhodesia. No doubt Rhodesia would never have reached the point of unilateral declaration of independence and guerilla activity, had previous British Governments tried to assess the sentiments of the local people independently, instead of believing reports from the White Government. Now that the situation has reached the point of open defiance by the White Government, your Government is taking a tougher stand - toollate, it seems.

Recent accusations against the former Labour Prime Minister, Sir Harold Wilson, for his alleged double standards towards trade with South Africa are indications (if true) that even a Labour Government will act contrary to the wishes of the British people who put them into power to carry out socialist, not capitalist, principles.

Unless you take steps to avoid these double standards now, you may find you have similar problems on your hands in Hongkong to those you face in Africa. Your Government has ignored all complaints about corruption in the past, and the triad-cum-official drug trade has been allowed to flourish. Consequently corruption reached such proportions that attempts to curb it have led to mutinous behaviour by the police. You must also consider the consequences in London, where you are plagued with the presence of triad activities in the drug trade of London's Chinatown. These have their origins in Hongkong.

The young people in Hongkong belong to nowhere. They are Chinese, born on Chinese soil, speaking the Chinese language, under a colonial regime that ignores their civil rights, and in some cases even subjects them to gross injustices. They have no say in their own affairs, and are intimidated if they attempt to speak up, by threats of non-employment. They are in the particularly difficult situation that they realise they cannot struggle for independence, and they will not press for that because it would be unacceptable to China. Britain has played upon that situation all too long, and the young people are becoming restless.

This frustration caused by Government deafness to their petitions, and the fact that the British Government prefers to remain ignorant of the facts about Hongkong, may one day erupt into violence, as it has done in the past. Surely it would be better to deflate the pressures now, than to wait for the explosion. Even the influence of Peking would not be able to control that.

We have made some simple proposals, and even these are adjustable. They are:

- (1) A Legislature of which one third is directly elected, one third appointed, and one third indirectly elected by professionals, as in our neighbouring Portuguese Colony, Macau.
- (2) A gradual phasing out of appointed members on the Urban Council at the rate of four every two years.
- (3) An expanded franchise to include all long-term adult residents of Hongkong.
- (4) Expansion of Urban Council jurisdiction to include housing, education, social welfare, town planning etc...

Lord Goronwy-Roberts says we must wait for an appropriate time. What time is appropriate? Now, or when it is too late?

(from the Star newspaper, 20 November 1978).