

A regional council for the NT?

The statement by the Chief Secretary, Sir Philip Haddon-Cave, on the "further development of district administration" marks an attempt to improve local government. It does so by proposing that the number of elected district board members should be double that of the appointed; and that a "regional council" should be established for the New Territories parallel with that of the Urban Council.

The Chief Secretary has called for public comment before proceeding with the plan, and in the meantime has ordered preliminary work to begin on the administrative, legal and financial implications. If public reaction is overwhelmingly against, it is not too late to rethink its ideas.

It is, however, hard to believe that there will be any resistance to increasing the elected membership in the district boards; perhaps the only question will be whether it is going ahead fast enough. For while some districts are still growing, as Sir Philip mentioned, and a slightly slower pace may be necessary, some may feel that the elected element could assume full control relatively quickly in older, well established areas.

Government caution, however, is understandable. Not because it has any doubts about the district administration scheme but it may well want to see how the idea of elections takes root and develops before giving the green light to fully elected boards, particularly if it leads to the appointment of elected district board members to Legislative Council.

As for the "regional council" for the New Territories, the Government's preference for a second body instead of expanding the existing Urban Council will provoke mixed feelings. While its antipathy to any Colony-wide council has been suggested from time to time, the Urban Council's role is limited, its record has been good and with its background and long experience it might be thought preferable to expand the existing body rather than start a new one.

For while the geographical area of the proposed regional council would embrace the New Territories, its work would mainly concern the increasingly heavily populated urban areas now emerging there. And to that extent the problems of one urban area are similar to those of another.

While recognising that the Heung Yee Kuk has a special position in the New Territories, its members could still be appointed to an expanded Urban Council without sacrificing their representative role, for today they should represent the new townsman as much as the old villager.

An enlarged council would also have been a good training ground for members to assume greater responsibilities in the Legislative Council, as has been the case in the past. This can still happen with the establishment of a "regional council" for the New Territories, but there are also problems left unresolved, such as the new town at Junk Bay and the islands south and west of Hongkong, as Sir Philip mentioned.

The Government's reasons for not wanting to promote an enlarged council which could rival Legislative Council and provide unwelcome pressures for change not in keeping with the wishes of the administration, are recognised. Equally the problems that major cities like London have faced with greater regional councils, headed by awkward chairmen, cannot be ignored.

Ultimately, we have to decide what is the best arrangement for our increasingly decentralised population. For as Sir Philip said, by 1991 there will be more living north of the Kowloon foothills than there are in Kowloon itself. And the time may come when we will need not one extra regional council but a number. Thus, rather than expand the Urban Council today only to have to carve it up into smaller bodies in future, which could have serious repercussions, the more sensible course would be to explore the Government's proposals as being the best in the long run.