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The pattern of district administration to come...

A GREEN PAPER FOR CAREFUL THINKING...

Good

THE classic question of Government administration in Hongkong, namely, how to achieve responsiveness without democracy, has been suggested a new solution in the Green Paper "A Pattern of District Administration" published last week.

A slim document of but 15 pages, this Green Paper may be just some rather sweeping administrative arrangements, or, it may be the first step in laying the foundation for far-reaching consequence to the political structure of Hongkong.

The most outstanding features in the approach proposed in the Green Paper are two: The division of Hongkong, Kowloon and the New Territories into districts with some kind of district council ("District Management Committee" in the old city, and "District Board" in the New Territories); the increase in the number of members to be elected to these district councils, and in this connection the extension of the franchise to all adults over 21 who have resided in Hongkong for three years or more.

All of these ideas have been around for some time. The question now is: Will the new pattern work?

Although the plan to establish electoral districts covers the whole of Hongkong, clearly there is little change in the role or structure of the Urban Council. The real focus is on the New Territories or rather, the New Towns. What this innovation amounts to is a change in the structure of unofficial representation there.

For many years, the administration of the New Territories has been different from the administration of city districts. There is careful regard and serious consideration for Chinese customs and tradition, local sentiments and various unchartered rights and duties. There is visible deference to the village organisations and leadership, and heavy reliance on the rural committees for bridging the gap between government and the people.

With the change in the make-up of the population in the New Territories now

into new towns, the traditional authorities can no longer represent the people in the sense of speaking on their behalf; nor can they command their acquiescence.

A more modern form of representation has therefore become desirable. It was in this context that the District Advisory Board was set up in various districts of the New Territories after 1977.

On this board - instead of the heads of the respected local families - now sit the headmasters and mistresses, the relatively young and educated people who take an interest in public affairs, with the usual government officers assigned to oversee the welfare, education, public works, services in the district.

The rural committee chairman sits too and is listened to with a good deal of respect, but he is only one among many. The traditional authority and traditional considerations no longer dominate, for the traditional form of organisation no longer puts its stamp upon the character of the new community.

The function of the District Advisory Board has been so far ambiguous. The terms of reference are vague and general. The budget is small, the influence on policy sporadic. The role of unofficial members therefore tends to be passive in the sense that it is more in the nature of responding to issues placed in front of them by the powers that be, than bringing up issues on their own initiative. Also, in the absence of a more definitive character, it sometimes concedes to the traditional and ceremonial; rather than the social and political.

The formal changes proposed in the Green Paper to the District Advisory Board are only two: The removal of the word "advisory" from its name,

and the inclusion into its membership a number of representatives directly elected by the residents of the district.

The former signifies, simply, that the Government intends to give the opinions expressed by the board greater weight - the real status of these opinions remain advisory. The latter change may be of greater or less impact, depending on the number of elected members, and especially on the members themselves.

What this says clearly is, from now on, the "official" body to advise the Government on behalf of the people of the New Territories is the District Board, not the Rural Committee.

Whether this shift of emphasis in the organisation of feedback would actually amount to anything sizable depends on the same factors on which depend the overall effectiveness of the whole scheme proposed in the Green Paper.

Clearly much depends on how the proposals will be accepted by the public on the one hand and civil servants on the other. On the side of the public, in fact more than first acceptance is required for the system to work. There are elected members already on the Urban Council, and the turnout of voters has been uniformly lukewarm. What makes us think there is going to be more enthusiasm this time round?

There is the precedence of the City District Officer, but the public has long since ceased to place much importance on them. What makes us think that localisation is going to be more effective this time round? These are not attempts to "pour cold water" over the new scheme. They are serious questions to discuss.

Let us try, just for a moment, to figure out how a district council (by any

name) is going to perform the functions of communication, co-ordination and advising the Government on behalf of the people. Basically, in a democracy, there is assurance that an elected representative represents the people of his district to some extent, that they have elected him on the basis of his platform, his proximity to them, and so on.

The elected representative has standard channels to keep in touch with the wishes his electorate, and they are interested to elect their man because he would have some power, in that position, to push through policies they wish him to.

Now, in the Hongkong situation, the elected representative is going to be seen to have little power; there will be a correspondingly smaller interest in him. So long as people do not take at least some initiative in coming forward to discuss their problems and needs, the job of gathering public opinion would remain indirect and difficult.

The same difficulty is likely to be experienced by the appointed unofficial member. His source of public opinion would be no greater than anyone else's. As an ordinary citizen he lives his busy but limited life of going to work and going home. His experience of the effect of government policies in the district is - in the normal course of events - limited to his work situation and the situation of his immediate family, his friends and colleagues.

He may, because of his voluntary acceptance of responsibility in accepting the appointment, give more time and attention to public issues. His views on public issues may be valuable at first to the Government, because they are usually founded on the experience of his life up to that point,

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and as such may constitute a refreshing and useful point of view.

But this, for most people, could only be very limited, and unreplenished by special effort, would soon be exhausted. His power of analysing issues may be again of service, but it would be independent of his role as a source of public opinion to the Government.

There is also the danger of such unofficial members on district councils working in isolation. There is no built-in organisation for a constant exchange of opinions with fellow members, except during meetings, since they live under very divergent circumstances.

Everyone knows that the people you talk to most often are people you meet routinely in the office, during meals, and other such circumstances. It helps if you go to the same club or common room, if you belong to the same social circle. It may not help if you live in the same district, or even the same building, unless you make a habit of calling on each other.

Increasing meeting frequency would not be desirable since meetings are time-consuming, and not always appropriate: organising dinner for members may not help as people tend to be polite or keep to small talk on such occasions.

The only thing that would be of any substantial effect is for such unofficial members to take an initiative, to invest time and efforts in actively seeking wide contact with the people, and to organise business-like exchanges among unofficial members of the districts. In other words, for the unofficial member, elected or otherwise, to act effective as a bridge between the Government and the people, to advise, pressure and

criticise the Government on their behalf, two things are required of them: Dedication and organisation.

Each acting only as an individual could hardly lead to much public good. In the end, the only benefit would be that the members would have gained, through participation, better insight into public administration in Hongkong, if at all.

On the Government's part, without wide and persistent public pressure, points presented to the Establishment through these channels will be soon swarmed by the myriad of bureaucratic considerations.

But, given that dedication and deliberate organisation, what incentive exists for the would-be unofficial member to undertake all this work on top of his paid employment? Essentially there is only one thing, and that is his own wish to be of service to the public. If notoriety and self-interest are his aims, he does not have to go through these channels.

For people who are willing to give up their own leisure for public services, there can only be one real reward: Results. No sensible person is willing to commit himself to such a programme without reasonable assurance that his time spent is going to be worthwhile.

The Green Paper contains no assurance beyond an expression of the Government's willingness to give greater recognition to public opinion. Financial provisions are not mentioned. Up to now funds placed under the control of the District Advisory Boards are relatively small, and confined to expenses incurred by projects such as minor environmental improvements and local cultural activities.

The scope is very limited indeed. Under the circumstance it is hard to

arouse much enthusiasm in taking the job seriously. It is all very edifying to speak one's mind in consultative meetings and to decorate local life with photographic competitions and trees with benches under them, and the like, but local people, the representative and represented, will have little doubt that all this is peripheral and unimportant - at least not important enough to go out of one's way for.

If the Government does not wish to have this Green Paper dismissed as window-dressing, it must make greater efforts to propose a wider and clearer scope of the work of the district boards, and provide them with realistic funds to achieve projects of significance.

There is little question that the Government would resist any formal release of its control over central policies, and therefore any departure from the position of treating all elected and unofficial participation as consultation. In this event people who participate can only do so on trust. Yet it would be a pity to give up the opportunity, the channels now made open by the Green Paper.

It is to be hoped that the Green Paper would receive the fullest discussion and critical attention of the public, and that the Government would amend the proposals, fill them out with concrete details and suitable provisions, in the light of public opinion.

For this exercise would, indeed, be the test case.

The effort to find results to be a good representative