

# As some doors open, other doors close...

by

Lin Bin

ALTHOUGH the trend in Hongkong is towards official bodies meeting in public, some District Board sub-committees are swimming against the tide by meeting behind closed doors.

Members of the Eastern DB have been at odds over the issue, with frustrated exponents of open meetings accusing elected members of being conservative and claiming the District Office staff favour

secret meetings.

The Eastern DB has three sub-committees, none of which had any regulations about whether their meetings would be open or private. The question had not arisen.

Two months ago, five voluntary agencies in Eastern District decided to conduct a survey on the work of DB members.

They asked to be allowed to look at sub-committee papers and records.

The chairmen of the three sub-committees at first promised to arrange this, but later ran into objections from some of their DB colleagues.

The DB committees were then con-

fronted with the need to decide whether the meetings were open to the public or not.

The Traffic and Transport Committee discussed the issue first, and agreed that meetings should be public. But the Community Development and Environmental Improvement committees decided the other way.

Sources said that conservative DB members — including some elected ones — had argued for closed meetings on four grounds:

- Opening meetings to the public would reduce public respect for DB members.
- Open meetings would increase the "mental burden" on participating council-

to the result. He said that a voter who put an "X" in the ballot square for a "yes" vote, instead of the usual tick, might have meant that he did not approve of the proposal.

Proponents of open meetings were surprised when the presiding district official accepted this argument and called for another ballot.

In the second round of voting, two ballots had "O" in the "yes" box, and one had an "X" in the "no" box.

The presiding officer ruled that the "O" votes were abstentions but accepted the "X" as a vote against.

Consequently the verdict of the meeting

was reversed and the conservative side carried the idea of closed meetings. Of Hongkong's 19 district boards, nine hold all their sub-committee meetings in public.

They are Wan Chai, Mong Kok, Yau Ma Tei, Kowloon City, Wong Tai Sin, Sham Shui Po, Tsuen Wan, Sha Tin and Northern.

Six DBs hold all their sub-committee meetings in private: Kwun Tong, Southern, Sai Kung, Tai Po, Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi, and Islands.

Four DBs have different arrangements — some open, some closed — for different sub-committees.

Members would not feel free to speak their minds if the public was admitted.

There was no point in opening the sub-committee meetings because they only indulged in preliminary discussion and did not make any substantive decisions.

Most of the appointed DB members were strongly in favour of closed meetings.

At one meeting which voted on the matter the voting was very close, leading to accusations of bias on the part of the presiding district official.

On the first count, open meetings were endorsed by a margin of one vote.

An appointed DB member then objected