

H.K. Standard

5 Feb. 1984

23.2

A passport plea for local ex-PoWs

I UNDERSTAND that the Secretary of State for Home Affairs is empowered under section 4 (5) of the British Nationality Act 1981 to register as British citizen any British Territories' citizen, who has at any time been in crown service.

It is no secret that the Hongkong government will at the appropriate time request the Secretary of State to exercise the discretionary power vested in him of granting British citizenship to certain civil servants holding top government posts or sensitive jobs, extending this prerogative to include even prominent local citizens on whom the Queen has graciously conferred knight-hoods, CBEs, OBEs, etc.

Let us assume that the strength of the civil service is roughly 171,000 and that an insignificant one per cent of this number will be recommended by the powers-that-be to the competent authority as deserving of being granted British citizenship.

On the basis of this calculation we arrive at the not inconsiderable figure in absolute terms of 1,710.

If this privileged minority in the civil service be deemed worthy of special treatment as a reward for services rendered to the crown, I respectfully submit that a small number of non-Chinese Hongkong ex-PoWs are equally no less deserving than these government servants.

For let it not be forgotten that when the Japanese attacked Hongkong on December 8, 1941 it had no naval or air support and was, therefore, militarily indefensible.

Yet these men, despite the daunting odds against them volunteered to stand up and fight the enemy, being even prepared to lay down their lives for King and country as, indeed, many did during the hostilities and thereafter in Japanese PoW camps.

If there is any other more convincing proof of loyalty to King and country than this I would like to know.

When the Japanese



troops occupied Canton in 1938 it became quite clear to our Intelligence people that Hongkong would be their next objective as a natural progression of Japan's ambitious and aggressive South-east Asian expansionist policy.

Yet, what naval units and fighter aircraft there were, were being in the interim systematically withdrawn from Hongkong to reinforce more hard-pressed fronts in other theatres of war.

When Hongkong's exhausted troops, fighting a losing battle from the word go, against a numerically superior and incomparably better equipped enemy, were ordered by the civilian authorities to lay down their arms after 18 days of heroic, but futile resistance, the Volunteers, as part of the local garrison, were offered up as sacrificial lambs to a ruthless foe, who not only had a long and atrocious record of not taking prisoners, but was known also not to be a signatory to the Geneva Red Cross Convention and, therefore, not bound by its humanitarian regulations, which proscribed inhumane treatment of PoWs.

Those lucky enough to survive the ordeal of 44 months in Japanese PoW death camps had to rebuild their homes from scratch, having lost theirs to looters without, however, receiving a red cent in compensation.

I leave it to the impartial judgment of the public to decide if non-Chinese ex-PoWs are as deserving as

certain civil servants of being granted British citizenship.

The number of non-Chinese ex-PoWs is so small that it will not affect materially the hypothetical total of 1,710 quoted earlier as the number of civil servants adjudged meriting special treatment.

Of surviving ex-PoWs in Hongkong, some are fortunate to be holders of UK British passports, a handful have third country ones, leaving but a scant few non-Chinese ex-PoWs facing the gloomy prospect of statelessness.

Unfortunately these men are not in the moneyed class, who can easily cut and run upon payment of vast sums of ready cash for third country passports: they are, alas, the hapless captive nuts caught between the crushing pincers of a political nut-cracker.

Of this shrinking group the youngest are in their 60s, the oldest in their 80s. Ex-PoW J.C.M. Grenham, who died on December 11, 1984, was 88.

The government need have no fear of being swamped with applications for British citizenship from Hongkong ex-PoWs, who have since migrated overseas for they all have by now acquired the citizenship of their respective countries of adoption.

It may not be amiss at this juncture to remind both the Hongkong and British governments that several of the forefathers of these veterans came to Hongkong virtually in the wake of Captain

Charles Elliot in 1841.

In six successive generations, the descendants of those pioneers have contributed in no small measure through their unremitting toil in diverse fields of endeavour, towards the miraculous transformation of a once barren and malarial-ridden rock to the postwar economic marvel and third largest financial centre that is today the envy of the world.

Surely these men, who have so loyally served the Crown in the past, deserve in their sunset years some reciprocal gesture of goodwill from the mother country as appreciation of their yeoman service.

All they now ask for are valid travel documents without which they cannot have peace of mind to enjoy the remaining few years vouchsafed them before they pass away from the scene. Can anything be more reasonable than such a request?

These vital documents are needed in replacement of the down-graded ones foisted upon them. They will be regarded as a form of insurance just in case after 1997 things do not pan out the way so confidently predicted by those who have valid passports tucked safely away in their suitcases.

After all, it cannot be denied that these unfortunate ex-PoWs are the unfair victims of a stroke of the pen, by which they have been arbitrarily deprived of their supposedly inalienable birthright in order that self-seeking politicians may serve some racist expediency.

Exco members Sir S.Y. Chung and Miss Maria Tam have urged the people of Hongkong to express their views on the new nomenclature of British Nationals (Overseas).

Non-Chinese ex-PoWs have through this appeal made their fears and hopes abundantly clear. They hope that the two worthy Exco members will vigorously press their claims with the government, for which they wish publicly to express beforehand their gratitude.

Luigi Ribeiro