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10 September 1978.

A perilous chasm

IT IS not a myth. There is a very real communications gap between the governors and the governed in Hongkong.

The governors, mostly expatriates, and the governed, mostly Chinese, do not live in the same areas, eat at the same restaurants, or go for the same entertainments.

They also read different newspapers, watch different television programmes, and move about in different circles. But worst of all, they do not even speak the same language.

Occasionally East meets West in sleazy Wanchai bars or soundproof company boardrooms or chic musical evenings at the City Hall. Such occasions, however, are not particularly conducive to a real understanding of each other and of how the other half lives.

Cultural, social, and linguistic differences present obstacles which are not easy to surmount.

There are Europeans in Hongkong who have been here more than 15 years whose only knowledge of the native population is confined to stories they hear in the clubs during lunch or after a few drinks. They do not have a single Chinese friend they would invite home to dinner.

Keeping one's distance seems to be the rule of the game. And it is a rule well understood by the Chinese. Most of them have no European friends. The two communities keep themselves to themselves; only at the fringe do they overlap.

The fringe consists of people who can speak both Cantonese and English, who understand Chinese ways and Anglo-Saxon attitudes, and who therefore constitute the living links between the

governors and the governed.

Some of the people in this category are, needless to say, civil servants. But their numbers are not confined to civil servants alone. The people who make the all important decisions in Government are quite willing to talk to bankers and manufacturers and unofficial members of the Legislative and Executive Councils.

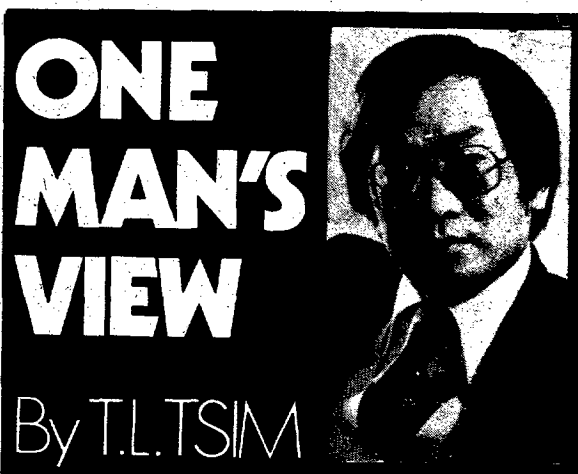
Very often, it is not in the interest of this group to represent the needs and wants of the common people, assuming of course that they know what these needs and wants are.

And yet, unfortunately, this group of people would be the first to meet any visiting members of Parliament or officials of the Foreign Office. And they certainly know how to put their views across — much more so than the token workers' representative or youth leader who are there to make up the numbers.

The art of making every word tell is not easily acquired by the underprivileged.

Most common people have no idea how decisions are made in the governmental process in Hongkong. They do not know that many well-meaning legislations had been killed off at the Legislative Council by people who are supposed to represent public opinion in Hongkong. When long awaited social reforms do not materialise, people will blame an entity called the Hongkong Government. They will blame the civil servants. Never have I heard them blame individual Legislative Councillors who might have been responsible for blocking such reforms.

Hongkong does not have a politically sophisticated population. Most of our



citizenry do not know what their rights or how to articulate their needs. But a few of them do.

These are the people who know how to capitalise on the Government's need for consultation. They can always be trusted to present views which protect their own narrow interests. And some of them would even try to pass these off as representative of majority opinion.

The Government is to blame only to the extent that it listens to these views with credulity. On occasions when the Government had the courage to sweep "official" opposition aside, it came up with some laudable propositions. Like nine years subsidised schooling for all, like the home ownership scheme, and like seven days paid holiday for the workers, to name but a few.

Consultation is, of course, a very attractive word. But very soon Government will have to decide what it means by consultation. If it is going to canvass the views of a small unrepresentative group only, that kind of consultation may be even more dangerous than no consultation at all.

Interest groups are quite capable of misrepresenting popular opinion to achieve their own ends.

Even if our Legislative and Executive Councillors have not indulged in such practices, the fact that they have been drawn from such a narrow popular base should be cause for concern. In order to function effectively, Government must keep in close touch with the mood of the governed. It must be able to feel the pulse of the majority of its people.

This is especially true in crisis situations when there is no time to do surveys and no room for miscalculations. At times like these a correct reading of the public mood is required. And one cannot do this without deep-seated roots in our community.

Very few unofficals in the Legco and Exco have claims to such roots. If a 1966 or 1967 situation should confront us again tomorrow, I am really not sure that the people in the two Councils, for all their eminence, for all their power and wealth would be able to give the right advice to our Governor.