

S. C. M. P.

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Walden calls for coalition on future

# 1997: 'People must speak up'

By SA NI HARTE

The people of Hongkong were yesterday urged to create a non-Government coalition to speak up for the Colony's future.

A former Director of Home Affairs, Mr John Walden, said the people "must intervene now, and they must intervene strongly."

He said negotiations on Hongkong's future had already begun and the public did not know who represented them in the talks, adding that the quickest way of getting a credible opinion was to do it through an unofficial coalition.

Mr Walden told a forum organised by Meeting Point — a campaigning group which will be formed officially on January 9 — that it was important that "the Hongkong community should clearly understand the limitations of the Hongkong establishment in safeguarding the interests of the Hongkong community when under pressure."



Mr Walden chats with the chairman of Meeting Point, Mr Cheung Ka-hing

He said the main interest of China and Britain in the talks on Hongkong was their future relations with each other.

"In the current negotiations on Hongkong's future the main pressure will be from China to achieve an outcome that is suitable to China. The British Government will wish to be seen to be honouring its moral responsibility to the people of Hongkong, but will also not wish to jeopardise its good

relations with China," he said.

Mr Walden questioned whether the Governor, Sir Edward Youde, without active support from Hongkong, could see that the Colony's preferences were respected.

He feared that the only concessions to Hongkong's wish to keep its present distinctive lifestyle might be "meaningless, generalised assurances of the kind that we have been hearing so often recently."

"Hongkong people will have to make up their own minds how successful Sir Edward Youde is likely to be without the weight of organised Hongkong opinion behind him," he said.

Mr Walden pointed out that most of the recent exhortations not to worry about the lease issue came from people who had British passports or who for other reasons, like wealth or foreign relatives, could leave the Colony if the future looked ominous.

He said that senior civil servants had already secured their own future by having an "escape clause," giving them the right to British residence, inserted in the Nationality Act.

"Whether many other Hongkong stayers are as conscious of what is at stake as the senior members of the Hongkong civil service, and whether they can appreciate the need to take concerted action ... I cannot say."

Mr Walden said the nearest parallel occurred in 1967 when the excesses of the "great proletarian cultural revolution" overflowed into Hongkong and the Hongkong community was scared stiff that British sovereignty would come to an end by means of internal insurrection.

At that time, he said, the Hongkong Government badly needed the mandate of the Hongkong community in order to take tough measures against "the troublemakers."

With a little Government orchestration, over 500 public bodies submitted a petition to the Government asking it to uphold law and order and deal firmly with the "troublemakers," he said.

"It was the first time in Hongkong history that the Hongkong public had ever come out openly to uphold the status quo."

Calling for a concerted effort to press Hongkong's views, Mr Walden said: "If enough people are prepared to act in this way it is just possible that

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# Call for coalition to speak on 1997

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some kind of coalition of responsible unofficial organisations might emerge, capable of assembling and conveying the views of a very large number of Hongkong people to the Hongkong, British and Chinese governments."

Unlike in 1967, such a movement should be independent of the Government, he said.

When asked how Hongkong should prepare for its future, Mr Walden said he would like to avoid this problem for the time being because it was a complicated one and needed more time.

But he said the problem with Hongkong's basic system was that "you have a 19th century Government trying to govern 20th century people."

Mr Walden (57) was in the civil service for about 30 years and was among the architects of the district administration scheme. He is

now studying Chinese at the Chinese University.

Official statements on the 1997 question had discouraged discussion, he said, saying "the outcome of the negotiation would be acceptable to the people of Hongkong."

But there had been "no attempt at all to find out the opinions of Hongkong people about their future before the negotiations with the Peking Government began," he said.

He noted that the British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, had said "firmly and in public that Britain has a moral responsibility for the people of Hongkong."

But the British Nationality Act 1981 — a measure apparently designed to ensure that most Hongkong people could never hope to go to Britain — suggested limits to this "moral responsibility."

Mr Walden said it seemed clear to him that "no prudent Hongkong stayer should accept the official assurances so

far given by the Chinese, British and Hongkong governments as a satisfactory basis on which to permit government officials to negotiate arrangements on his behalf."

He said that this view appeared to be shared by the former Governor, Lord MacLehose.

While he was Governor of Hongkong, Lord MacLehose "complied with the official line," Mr Walden said.

But since his retirement he had twice urged Hongkong people to make their views known.

Mr Walden warned Hongkong people against relying on official channels. "They must realise that such channels are rarely effective when what the Government wants is different from what the general public wants."

"And in this case the very last thing the Hongkong Government will want is a strong local lobby demanding to have its views taken into account in the current negotiations, or worse, insisting that

it should be consulted before the arrangements agreed with the Chinese Government are formally ratified," he said.

He also saw no hope of Unofficial members of the Executive and Legislative Councils taking a vigorous stand.

"They often do oppose the Government in public, and even more vociferously in private," he said.

"But it has been shown time and time again that they see their role as basically supportive rather than adversarial."

"Where it is known that the official side ... are fundamentally opposed to a proposal they will eventually back down rather than give the Government system an appearance of disunity," he said.

He said some Unofficials were inhibited by the fact that they were appointed by the Governor.

"Furthermore we cannot always be sure which 'public' Unofficial members are

representing, nor to what extent their view of public opinion is influenced by what the Government itself would wish that public opinion to be," he said.

Mr Walden recalled that an Unofficial member giving evidence to the Hongkong Air Transport Licensing Authority had under cross-examination been forced to disclose that the "public" whose opinion he was purporting to represent were in fact wealthy friends and associates from exclusive Hongkong clubs.

Asked whether district boards could reflect public opinion, he said this sort of topic was outside their terms of reference.

It was once thought that the district boards could have a role as sounding boards on "national topics," he said.

But at present their discussions were limited to matters of local interest and any attempt to discuss 1997 would probably be ruled out of order.