

H. K. Standard 29 Aug 1983

## A big voice of the HK grassroots

MRS ELSIE Elliott obviously hit home with some hard-hitting comments about Hongkong's communication gap.

The truth is that the yawning credibility chasm between the government and the people here doesn't seem to get any narrower. And one wonders why a more positive effort isn't being made to bridge it.

The government has never favoured grassroots democracy. And it is not being offered now — despite acting Governor Sir Philip Haddon-Cave's claim that his is a responsive government that listens to public opinion.

Any long-time Hongkong resident can cite numerous occasions when public opinion has been ignored. There also have been times when leaders have gone out of their way to hide their activities from the prying eyes of the public. The notorious \$21 million donation to the Falklands Fund is only one example.

Mrs Elliott is not the only one in recent days to have raised the question of the communication gap. Some Hongkong University students recently expressed their dissatisfaction with the letter Haddon-Cave wrote them in answer to their claims that the government doesn't listen to public opinion.

Heungyeekuk members have frequently — and with considerable justification — criticised the government for not doing enough to boost the quality of life for New Territories residents in keeping with the area's rapid development.

More recently, Kuk members have charged that the government no longer consults them on New Territories issues. On land issues in particular, the views of New Territories people have not been considered since the setting-up of the Land Department last year, Kuk members say, adding that land matters are no longer dealt with at district office level. They have even gone so far as to threaten moves towards self-administration of the New Territories.

Meanwhile, Mrs Elliott has made the very valid point that only those at grassroots level can represent the Hongkong people in speaking up on 1997.

Too many top officials here give the impression that the government will always look at Hongkong as a colony of many splendoured contentment, a sleepy hollow for five million people, living in a garden where nothing grows, except the roses that the government wishes to plant.

But Mrs Elliott has declared war on complacency. And her submission is something that cannot be taken lightly, especially when she reminds us that "only the pressure groups, student bodies and organisations at the grassroots level can represent Hongkong people."

Mrs Elliott was speaking specifically about 1997. But the same philosophy can also be applied to more domestic issues.

Current social problems here are compounded by the fact that many of the sympathetic, social welfare-orientated civil servants are leaving the colony. And there are still too many crusty, conservative bureaucrats here, who tend not to be "people-oriented."

It is well-known that Hongkong's social progress lags behind the colony's economic growth.

And confronting us, like so many well-primed time bombs, are such burning issues as poor housing, bad transport, high tariffs and unsatisfactory services provided by some franchised public utilities, and inadequate consumer protection.

Government officials can't afford to assume a frog-in-the-well mentality — remaining submerged and refusing to acknowledge the festering sore of discontent.

Realities are always hard to face. But the truth is that improvements are necessary in any society and there is always room for more. And the mandate of both decency and emergency is that official attention be paid to the grassroots voices.

We have long admired Mrs Elliott for her persistence, her perceptiveness, her abiding love for and patriotism to Hongkong.

We must hope that her comments might start the ball rolling on issues that need immediate attention.