

S.C.M.P.

8 Oct 1982

1997 referendum waste of time: commerce chief

A referendum on the future of Hongkong would be a "complete waste of time and a childish exercise," according to the director of the Hongkong General Chamber of Commerce, Mr Jimmy McGregor.

His comment follows a suggestion by Dr John Young, a lecturer in Chinese studies at the University of Hongkong, who said on Tuesday that a referendum must be held within the next six months if Hongkong's stability and prosperity are to be maintained.

"With all respect to Dr Young, I think it would be disastrous to have a referendum with a result already known," Mr McGregor said.

Saying that most people of Hongkong will vote to maintain Hongkong's economic status quo, he said it would be an "insult" to China.

"I think the talks between Britain and Hongkong are to be held on several assumptions and one is that the people of Hongkong hope to continue with the present status quo," he said.

Similar sceptical remarks have also come from academics, who said that results of a referendum depend on how



Mr McGregor

the questions are phrased.

"You get answers one would expect if the questions are set in a certain way," one said.

He said it would be better for the people of Hongkong to remain "calm and sensible."

Mr McGregor said he did not agree with recent criticisms made by the leader of Britain's new Social Democrat Party, Mr Roy Jenkins, about Mrs Margaret Thatcher's



Mrs Elliott

er's handling of the recent Peking talks.

Mr Jenkins said the Prime Minister had opened the way for a "pointless and premature, but potentially damaging, argument over sovereignty" with Chinese officials.

Mr McGregor, himself a SDP member, said: "Too many people have the false impression of serious differences on sovereignty."

He said Mrs Thatcher was

well briefed by the Governor, Sir Edward Youde, the British Ambassador to Peking, Sir Percy Cradock, and the Foreign Office prior to her China visit.

"There was a limit to what she could say. No one expected her to come up with an agreement," he said.

A different viewpoint, however, came from an Urban Councillor, Mrs Elsie Elliott, in a written statement to the SCM Post, which will also be sent to the Prime Minister and several Members of Parliament.

She said Mrs Thatcher's references to the unequal treaties with China as being "valid at international law" and that to break them would be "very serious indeed" had antagonised the Chinese Government.

They have also created panic on the local stock market and alienated many Hongkong people who might otherwise prefer some kind of status quo arrangement, she said.

"As a trained lawyer, Mrs Thatcher must be aware that an agreement signed under duress is not a valid agreement, but rather a crime — unless, of course, she has not studied how Hongkong became British last century.

"The treaties she dogmatically sticks by have never been recognised by any Chinese Government as equal, freely negotiated treaties," she said.

Her statement includes an explanation on the historical background leading to the treaties.

Mrs Elliott said that Mrs Thatcher might have better grounds for negotiation if she apologised for the shameful conduct of the "Whig Government."

"It indicates the ignorance of her advisers that she committed the unforgiveable in Chinese eyes — making claim to their sacred land by calling upon the hated treaties of the last century," the statement said.