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1991 Legco shake-up to go ahead

By Antony Cheesewright in London

BRITAIN has given Hongkong the go-ahead to make radical changes to the Legislative Council in 1991.

The agreement from Whitehall for the shake-up was won by the Governor, Sir David Wilson, who is in London.

Sir David had talks last week with the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, and the Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Hongkong, Francis Maude.

Sir David returns to Hongkong today after his trip to Britain.

He will brief members of the Executive Council tomorrow on the outcome of his discussions with the British government.

According to Whitehall sources, British ministers have accepted an Executive Council plan to divide Hongkong into nine constituencies, each with a population of about 600,000 people.

A senior Whitehall official said last night: "The colony will be split into nine constituencies, each with two directly elected seats, in 1991."

"There are also figures being bandied around on reducing the number of official members of the Legislative Council."

Sources said the official representation in the Legislative Council would be greatly reduced to three ex-officio members - the chief secretary, the financial secretary and the attorney-general.

Functional constituencies will, however, be greatly boosted from the present 14 seats to 22 in 1991.



Both the Urban and Regional councils will be placed under the functional constituency category.

These two municipal councils are now part of the electoral college.

But the Hongkong Government has no plan to increase their number of seats, which is currently one each.

It is understood that the Hongkong Government has also accepted in principle that the Heung Yee Kuk, a residents' body representing the interests of indigenous villagers in the New Territories, should become a new functional constituency which can return a candidate for the Legislative Council in 1991.

As regards appointed members, the Whitehall sources also said the Hongkong Government would keep this appointment system in 1991.

But there will be no appointed members in 1995 under the through-train arrangement between Britain and China.

There will be a total of 17 appointed members, whose appointments will be made by the Hongkong Governor after the election results in 1991, so that the Hongkong Government can then prescribe a balanced composition for the law-making body.

All these will add up to a total of 60 members for the Legislative Council in 1991.

This will mark a milestone for the constitutional development of the territory with the introduction of directly-elected members to the legislature for the first time since Hongkong became a British colony.

Whitehall sources said direct elections in 1991 would be a watershed for Hongkong's political reforms.

It is believed China will closely monitor the impact of direct elections on the territory and examine whether Hongkong people behave in a mature manner politically.

"This is crucial for Britain to persuade China in future talks that Hongkong is ready to further accelerate its constitutional reforms after 1991," sources said.

Britain and China have agreed on a political blueprint for the first Special Administrative Region government after the sovereignty reverts back to China in 1997.

But other arrangements will be made in 1995 so that there will be a smooth transfer of government under the so-called "through-train" model.