

S.E.M.P.

14 Nov. 1984

DEAR Ian,

Yours is an odd job (surely we used to have Secretaries for Chinese Affairs, District Commissioners, Umelco, hundreds of committees of advising Unofficials, not to speak of Special Branch, to analyse and assess opinion for us all the time?), but Hongkong has always set up new departments when something untoward happens and the obvious existing one isn't "appropriate."

It was a good choice anyway to pick someone in whose cells coiled the genes of one of the most compassionate and shrewd of the dependent Empire's Governor-Generals.

Not that it's exactly an enviable commission — suppose that public opinion were to come up with the wrong answer? Mind you, there's been some pretty authoritative prejudgment going on to point to the right answer.

The Prime Minister of China said the agreement would be faithfully implemented, and China's national interests would be best served by Hongkong's continuing stability and prosperity.

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, encouraged by dips and hacks to see himself as a second Peter Carrington (bringing home from Peking as unexpectedly plump a fitch of bacon as came out of Salisbury/Harare), said it was a formal legally binding agreement, working out unique arrangements so that a unique society might keep its distinctive economic and social systems unchanged until 2047.

Hongkong's Governor said the 1997 uncertainties had been removed, and the people could continue to plan their lives, work and raise their families in peace and security with their rights and freedom under the law.

The Senior Unofficial endorsed it because it substantially met the people's major requirements — besides, ah, the alternative was a unilateral declaration by China.

Well, as the lassie once opined, they would, wouldn't they? But there it all is in black and white: for example, "Entry into the Hongkong Special Administrative Region of persons from other parts of China

# 1997=Catch 22

shall continue to be regulated in accordance with the present practice" (er, wot aboot the Gurkhas?).

Again, the basic policies envisage the capitalist system and lifestyle remaining unchanged until 2047, only substituting for the British Secretary of State's present practical or nominal powers of approval of the appointment of the chief executive and other senior functionaries, similar powers for China's Central People's Government, after local selection by election — or as a natural alternative, by, um, "consultation." No real difference.

the one with the bells on.

No wonder all the City's Dreadful Knights (was that pun on James Thomson not originally Claude Burgess?) have been photographed grinning over their clinking glasses of champers or mao-tai at the scrutable faces that have offered all these gift horses; diplomatically, of course it is a veritable triumph, and pragmatically, of course public opinion will endorse it.

So you needn't put the undiplomatic opinion of a farflung scribe into your assay balance, even when he recalls that it is now the 380th anniversary of Sir Henry

tion between the communists and the KMT in the streets and the local ballot box, and met minimum resistance despite the spread of liberal thinking.

Now in both the Green Paper and the "draft" agreement we are moving to the constitution of the legislature by elections, and it is sensible to look at experience elsewhere of introducing elections in a hurry to communities previously innocent of representative responsibility.

That means, not only the fundamental change in the distinctive social system, but also ignoring the long and sometimes

## Our Edinburgh correspondent writes a letter to Mr I.F.C. Macpherson, OBE, JP, Commissioner for the Assessment Office

Other parts are reminiscent of the product of pre-independence constitutional conferences for those colonies that were not thought to be unique: so judges will be appointed on the recommendation of an independent commission (which will include, mhm, "other eminent persons" besides top judges and lawyers); officials and pensioners shall all continue with conditions no less favourable than before; "Hongkong, China" will have virtual international autonomy in the economic, trade, financial and monetary, shipping, communications, touristic, cultural and sporting fields (just like Taiwan?); Central People's defence forces stationed in HKSAR shall not interfere in internal affairs (internal security always did have external implications); existing human, legal, religious, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights shall remain in force.

It is all too good to be true, and none of our Hongkong Chinese friends is gross enough in language to invite us in the Hakka equivalent to pull the other one,

Wotton's writing that an ambassador is an honest man sent to die abroad for the good of his country.

That country in the negotiations was the UK, not Hongkong, as China never failed to reiterate, and UK's good is defined in King Charles St, Whitehall.

One must concede that a team of overseas civil servants, volunteers who identified with the good of their chosen territory of dependent citizens, might have negotiated no better scrap of paper, judged by good as it might be defined in Lower Albert Road.

But, conceding also that there is no realistic possibility of amending the text, and that the Catch 22 which we all always knew would come one day in our lifetimes was imposed by the facts of Hongkong's history, there is a comment which cannot be withheld.

Hongkong's post-war uniqueness was inextricably tied to its lack of parliamentary democracy, which persisted because of the unacceptability of public competi-

dealing inherent in power-seeking discourages the able practitioners, although the less successful may be attracted.

So if Hongkong's elections are to be direct and not through devious electoral colleges, will the candidates be uniquely devoted to the territory's pre-1984 economic and social systems?

Or will they be unique in another way — that just as success for Hongkong's Chinese in public life has so far been a function of their ability to adjust to the idiosyncracies of a system led successively by Grantham and Clarke, Black, Trench and Cowperthwaite, MacLehose and Haddon-Cave, Youde and Bremridge, so in the future it will be a matter of double-guessing what is least likely to upset, first, the joint liaison group and, runner-up by a corporate nose, the grandparents of the inheritors of 2047, which will demand even greater, oops, flexibility?

From the distance of Edinburgh the emotional involvement is as great as ever it was in the days when everyone thought all the time of 1997 and nobody was supposed to talk about it; but one's view may be less cluttered by placatory propaganda and the sheer paraphernalia of "assessment."

Let us shed no tears over those who will have found havens before 1997 in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore or other countries where forerunners have already become good citizens; most will have made their contribution to Hongkong.

We have to bite the bullet of concern over the admirable five million on the backs of whose intelligence, energy and grit Hongkong's achievements have been erected; the bamboo will sway in the wind as ever, and stand upright again in the new climate.

The people who most deserve our sympathy and in the next few years will need your and your senior colleagues' most delicate guidance will be that minority of younger public servants, the ones without rich relations and overseas contacts, who have identified themselves with a British service and its ways, and must now choose between playing lead parts in the great changes of substance while the formal shadows appear to linger, and retreating into less lime-lit vocations.