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# 1997 model similar to system in Ireland

THE New Hongkong Alliance has not revealed where it drew its inspiration from for its novel "parallel chamber" model for after 1997. But the proposal appears to be a hybrid of the Irish and Norwegian systems, which both have bicameral legislatures.

The functional chamber envisaged by the alliance has a distinct touch of the Irish about it.

The Republic of Ireland's legislature comprises a second chamber based on functional representation where members are elected from various occupations and professions.

The duplication of powers between the two proposed functional and district chambers, on the other hand, appears to be modelled on the Norwegian system.

In Norway, a single elected chamber is split to form a bicameral legislature.

Even so, the two-house notion is not entirely novel to the territory.

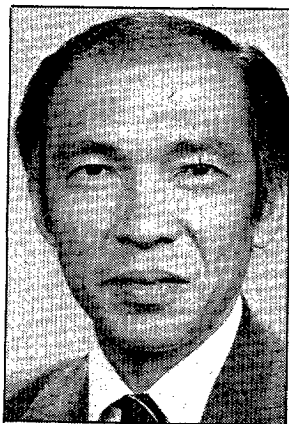
Legislator Andrew Wong Wang-fat and former Basic Law drafter Louis Cha were among the first locals to appreciate the merits of a bicameral legislature for post-1997 Hongkong.

Unlike the alliance, the pair had separately envisaged a bicameral set-up with a clearer division of labour between the chambers. Perhaps because it sounded so complex, their proposals were not pursued during discussions on the draft Basic Law.

As early as 1986, Mr Cha presented a bicameral option to the Basic Law Drafting Committee's political sub-group. The suggestion failed to survive the first draft of the Basic Law. The concept was buried before it was dug up again by the alliance yesterday - only 63 days before the Basic Law public consultation exercise ends.

Under the alliance model, the two parallel chambers will have the same jurisdictions and power to veto each other's legislative initiative.

The arrangement is different from the familiar bicameral set-ups in other Commonwealth democracies. Most modern assemblies are founded on a two-chamber system - the most well known ones being those of the United States and United Kingdom.



Andrew Wong

In Asia, President Corazon Aquino's 1986 constitution made the Philippines the latest country to adopt a bicameral legislature.

Prominent exceptions of the bicameral tradition, on the other hand, include New Zealand, which scrapped its upper house in 1950. Denmark did likewise in 1954, while Sweden followed in 1970.

A main argument for an additional chamber is to widen the representative basis of the legislative assembly, particularly in case of federal states.

The American Senate sees two representatives from each of the 50 states irrespective of population, while the Australian Senate has 10 members from each of the six states.

The same pattern is followed in other federal states, ranging from the communist Soviet Union to impartial Switzerland.

The argument falters when applied to Hongkong as the alliance proposal for a second chamber is not meant to reinforce geographical representation.

Instead, the representativeness of the functional chamber is bound to be challenged whenever it is at loggerheads with its district chamber counterpart.

After all, by being directly elected, half of the district chamber's members will enjoy the support of the public at large, while the functional chamber will only enjoy the support of peers.

The alliance's defence for a two-chamber legislature is mainly political.

It is counting on the functional chamber as a conservative force to counter any hasty liberal actions that might flourish in the district chamber.

In short, the mechanism

is designed to preserve the status quo as any initiative in the elected chamber, such as better labour protection laws, could easily be checked by the functional chamber.

As a result, many are worried that the alliance model might give rise to unnecessary confrontation.

The alliance package, in its present form, provides no venue for arbitration if the two chambers with identical powers are locked in an impasse.

If this is not satisfactorily resolved, the new government could well be paralysed by two warring, but equal chambers.

More than 200 amendments were put forward by the Legislative Council's ad hoc group on a bill which sought to better regulate the securities markets.

The Government might be inhibited from introducing similar technical legislations in future, as officials are supposed to solicit consent from both chambers which appeared to be, not only unduly time consuming, but next to impossible.

The timing of the alliance launch of its package was surprising.

The model was announced after two recent trips to Beijing by Alliance honorary secretary Lo Tak-shing, who returned with the apparently unpopular message that China would deem any local demand for faster direct elections as confrontational.

The alliance's latest move also came after Executive and Legislative Councillors unanimously agreed on a middle-of-the-road political blueprint, which envisages a unicameral legislature with at least half of its members filled by direct elections by 1995 and fully elected by 2003.

After the June 4 massacre, there has been a new urgency to speed up the pace of democracy as a safeguard against future interference from Beijing.

But given the liberal pressure groups' established grassroots links, the business lobby is worried that the legislature might fall into the hands of a bunch of what they dubbed as "political idealists".

The proposal for a functional chamber is tailored to curtail the potential influence of the liberal activists.