

Advice worth hearing

BEIJING'S choice of its second batch of Hongkong advisers, officially named yesterday, shows the benefit of the wisdom acquired from the first group of people it picked out a year ago. It is not so easy for their critics to write them off as a bunch of self-serving, pro-China "toadies", although that accusation will continue. The names on the new list received a more favourable reaction — except from those left out — because it represents a wider spectrum of Hongkong life.

At a time when members of the Legislative Council could soon be facing a deeply divisive decision on the Governor's political reforms, the selection of prominent personalities from the community prepared to answer a public roll-call by Beijing bears increased significance.

The inclusion of former senior Hongkong Government officials and prominent academics among the more predictable line-up of businessmen and political figures makes a public relations point for Beijing that will not be lost. It will be widely assumed that they are standing up to be counted on China's side in the battle of wills with the Governor, however much individuals might protest that they are accepting the advisory post to offer unbiased counsel, purely for the overall good of Hongkong.

It would have been a stronger argument if the 49 people picked by Beijing had also included political representatives from the liberal camp (in the proper sense of the word, rather than the conservatives who have tried to hijack the concept to confuse the voters). It had been thought that Beijing might feel bold enough to invite members of Meeting Point, the group that has some potential to fill the vacant middle ground in Hongkong's evolving political landscape.

It was never possible that Beijing would go so far as to consider any members of the United Democrats, but failing to take the opportunity to seek representation from other, paler specimens in the political spectrum means that allegations that the chosen group are no more than a collection of yes-men and women will persist, and stick. If China

wants to avoid the claim that it only wants to hear echoes of its own voice, it will have to be braver next time.

The prospect of broadening the political representation on the advisory panel was held out yesterday by Chinese spokesmen, but the same come-on noises were heard last time around, and they begin to have a siren quality, calculated to lure the unwary or the gullible. The good behaviour strings attached to the suggestion are all too obvious to see. With another list of advisers in the pipeline for next year, those hoping it will be third-time lucky for them can be expected to go all out to impress.

Even the harshest critics of the Beijing regime will find it hard to argue that both batches of 92 advisers do not contain some of the best talents in the territory. Ignoring the party hacks and the lackeys, the group still represents a formidable collection of knowledge and influence that, if properly used by Beijing, could be of enormous benefit to the development of a better Hongkong-China relationship — and there can hardly be a soul in the territory who does not see the advantage of that at this time.

It would be an insult to the integrity and intelligence of many of those on the list to suggest that they have accepted the post simply to protect their own post-1997 position or interests. Nevertheless, China will need to demonstrate that they have a real input, rather than being part of an image-driven charade, simply intended to isolate the Governor and score political points.

The process of transition now under way in Hongkong is immensely complex, with no models to follow. If the advisers help to make it smoother, by ensuring that China's rulers and the bureaucracy that serves them have a better understanding of what makes Hongkong such a success, then they will have done a job of which they can be proud, and for which the people of Hongkong would be deeply grateful. If, however, they find their advice falling on stony ground time after time, they should not be afraid to say so.