

Aug 14 81.

HONGKONG

A tale of two rocks

Britain's House of Lords upsets Hongkong Chinese by favouring Gibraltar residents on citizenship

By Dinah Lee

London: The House of Lords renewed the controversy over the British Nationality Bill when it passed an amendment on July 22 giving the 27,000 people of Gibraltar — the British rock which guards the entrance to the Mediterranean — the right to British citizenship, while denying the right to the more than 5 million people of Hongkong — described in the 19th century as “a barren rock with not a house upon it.” The amendment is seen by opponents, particularly the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, as destroying the main purpose of the bill, which is to dismantle the immigration and citizenship anomalies created by past legislation. The bill creates three categories of British citizenship, two of which — citizens of British dependent territories and citizens of British overseas territories — exclude the right of entry and abode in Britain. The Lords' amendment (150 in favour and 112 against) effectively discriminates against the most important and populous of all British dependent territories, Hongkong.

A prominent Hongkong Chinese spokesman, former executive council member Sir Yuet-keung Kan, said the amendment was “another nail in our coffin.” A popular belief that Hongkong has not won any sympathy in Britain for its political dilemma (Chinese territory under British administration) has thus been reinforced by what is seen by critics as a racist bias in favour of Gibraltarians. The frustration felt by educated Hongkong Chinese is further aggravated by the knowledge that, while they are perfectly entitled to be outraged at the discrimination, too much publicity for such feelings might upset Peking: it would give China the impression that a number of Hongkong Chinese are nervous about the prospect of being ruled from Peking.

Gibraltar's case was built on sentiments

expressed by Lord Bethell, whose strongest argument was the position of Gibraltarians as citizens of the European Economic Community (EEC). In his capacity as a member of the European Parliament he said that if the amendment to give Gibraltarians the automatic right to citizenship was not passed, “27,000 EEC citizens would have one type of citizenship and the other 260 million another, the full citizenship of their member states.” He added that “anyone who has visited Gibraltar would know the gut emotional feeling of Britishness common to almost everyone there.”

However, Lord Geddes argued that though Hongkong could not claim EEC membership, arguments for Gibraltar's loyalty to the crown demonstrated during World War II, and its precarious position vis-à-vis Spain, were countered by Hongkong's bravery in resisting the Japanese; its own inability to become independent; its sensitive relationship with China and, most importantly, the view from Hongkong that the change in the wording of its people's passports would indicate an erosion of Britain's commitment to the territory and cause difficulty for Hongkong people travelling abroad.

During the Gibraltar debate, Lord Elwyn-Jones had submitted an amendment which would guarantee each of the dependent territories their own individual citizenship—for example, British (Gibraltar) Citizen, or British (Hongkong) Citizen. Earlier in the House of Commons debate on the same bill, that suggestion was raised by the chairman of the Anglo-Hongkong parliamentary committee, Sir Paul Bryan, but was defeated.

One opponent of such a change in the wording, Lord Trefgarne, said: “To suggest that the person concerned was a British citizen would not be accurate and

would not be a proper thing to include in the passport because they will not be British citizens.”

Elwyn-Jones's reply was simply to say that Trefgarne's message would be very depressing when heard in Hongkong, and that he hoped it would not become too widely known. Calling the reportedly close consultations between the British and Hongkong governments a dialogue between the deaf, Elwyn-Jones withdrew his amendment.

Geddes also attempted to correct the impression that the question of numbers was an important factor (Gibraltar has a population of some 27,000; Hongkong has at least 5.1 million people, 2.6 million of whom are British subjects). He stressed the unlikelihood of more than 1,000 Hongkong British passport holders coming to Britain in any one year. As a result of the Commonwealth immigration acts of 1964 and 1968 and the 1971 Immigration Act, the rights of Hongkong Chinese to come to Britain had been so diminished that today the special quota system restricted Hongkong to 150 people a year. In 1980, about 100 people entered Britain with work permits, most of them to work in the restaurant trade, while another 890 dependents had come in under existing immigration provisions.

Racism was gently touched on. Trefgarne, who opposed making exceptions for any dependent territories, insisted that if Britain was to have a special citizenship, then the dependent territories must share a parallel, but not secondary, citizenship. He said it would be “invidious and discriminatory to let amendments be made to the bill on grounds of race as has been alleged.” Creating a lot of separate exceptions and citizenships would “breed confusion for our successors.”

Whether race was basically at issue, as alleged by community leaders in Hongkong, some of the more emotional arguments in favour of “our kith and kin in Gibraltar who live on British pensions and retire to Scotland” certainly gave the debate a racial overtone. Geddes pointed out that all Hongkong wanted was to maintain the status quo. “They know they have no right of entry or abode and are not looking for it. But they don't want to be deemed second-class citizens, belongers of nowhere.”



Lord Geddes; the Rock of Gibraltar: a question of numbers?