

Acting chief justice assures continuity of legal system

THE acting chief justice has pledged that Hong Kong will remain part of the "great common law family" after 1997.

Justice Noel Power last night gave a reassurance that the judicial system under the Special Administrative Region would be guaranteed by the Basic Law, and judges from other common law jurisdictions would still be appointed.

In a speech to the Eighth International Conference of the Society for the Reform of the Criminal Law, he said that the maintenance of the territory's rule of law beyond 1997 was the most significant element for the future.

"The common law system which has served Hong Kong so well for the past 150 years will remain," he said.

"The courts will continue to exercise judicial power independently. The principle of trial by jury will remain."

Mr Justice Power joined the Hong Kong judiciary as a magistrate in 1965 after practising as a barrister in Australia. The Brisbane-born graduate of the University of Queensland was president of the Lands Tribunal from 1976 to 1979.

He was appointed a High Court judge in 1979 before becoming a justice of appeal in 1987. In March last year, he became vice-president of the Court of Appeal.

Last night, he said the handover of sovereignty would not affect the position or work of judges in Hong Kong.

"Judges will continue to

enjoy immunity while performing their judicial office," he said.

"They will continue to enjoy security of tenure — a prerequisite of the independence of the judiciary.

"Judges will continue to be selected by an independent body which will look, as it does now, at their integrity and ability.

"Judges will continue to be recruited from other common law jurisdictions after 1997."

Turning to crime figures, he said Hong Kong had an "extraordinarily low level of crime — lower than almost all other cities", citing 1993's crime rate as the lowest in 10 years.

He said the territory's level of crime was "only one-tenth of that of an average large American city" achieved "in an urbanised, fast moving and cosmopolitan community".

Transcribed by [unclear]