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by

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LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM IN HONG KONG:
PROMISES AND LIMITATIONS*

LAU Siu-kai, Ph.D.

This paper focuses only on local administrative reform in the urban areas of Hong Kong. The same reform, also to be applied to the rural areas (the New Territories), will not be discussed. Also omitted from discussion, because of the complications they would introduce into the paper, are the changes to be made in the composition of the Urban Council and the methods of election of half of its membership. In the preparation of this paper, I benefited from the ideas and insights of Dr. Kuan Hsin-chi and Dr. Ho Kam-fai.

LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM IN HONG KONG:
PROMISES AND LIMITATIONS

In January 1981, the Hong Kong government announced its plan to reorganize its local administrative apparatus in a White Paper entitled District Administration in Hong Kong.¹ Its policy content was subsequently formalized in two bills: the District Boards Bill 1981 and the Electoral Provisions Bill 1981. In essence, the plan calls for mild reforms at two levels. Within the bureaucratic administration, an organizational format will be instituted to enable officials dispatched to local areas to coordinate their activities and to make minor decisions which will affect the well-being of the local populace.

This is primarily an exercise at administrative deconcentration, and falls far short of administrative decentralization or the establishment of autonomous local governments. At the district level, local advisory boards will be established, which will contain an elected element based on a universal adult suffrage. These boards will be assigned the duty to advise local officials as to the needs and opinions of the districts. Even after the scheduled reforms are fully implemented, the political system of Hong Kong will remain essentially unchanged. Decision-making power will continue to be monopolized by a monocratic administrative apparatus made up of appointed officials, whose dominance is largely unchallenged because of the absence of any other autonomous political institutions in the Colony.

However, inasmuch as an elected element is to be included in the reform plan, the White Paper in itself is still a signal event in the

political history of this British Colony, as it carries the symbolic implication that the people will 'count' in the decision-making process of the government, even though the reform itself is a far cry from the ideal of grassroots democracy.

While there is no question that the Hong Kong government is sincere in its attempt to improve administrative efficiency, increase policy responsiveness and promote political participation in the Colony, it is our contention that the reform measures as devised are inadequate tools for the attainment of these goals. Needless to say, some administrative benefits can be reaped from the implementation of these reforms as a result of the acquisition of more information on the people by locally-assigned officials, and from their exposure to local sentiments and problems. Nevertheless, they do not seem to be able to cope effectively with the diverse problems which afflicted the administration in the last decade or so. Specifically, these problems are: administrative overload (especially at the center where most of the decisions, including many minor ones, have to be made), escalating administrative costs, expansion of the service and managerial role of the government, an increasingly militant civil service, rising public aspirations for public services and intervention, the weakening of mediating organizations between the government and the people, the proliferation of sporadic, small-scale and issue-related collective actions at the grassroots level which revolve around policy implementation, the widespread social problems spawned by rapid urbanization and appalling population density, and the inadequacy of both public and voluntary services. While the local

administrative reform can be considered an attempt by the government to manage more effectively an increasingly complex and unmanageable urban society, the implicit assumptions underlying the planned measures are that it can be made more manageable simply by means of a modicum of administrative reforms, and that these reforms can, to a certain extent, guide the social forces in such a way that the problems which call forth the reforms in the first place can more effectively be handled. It is the purpose of this paper, however, to show that the planned reforms are only minimally related to the resolution of these problems and that more should be done to alleviate the predicament in which the government currently finds itself.

THE REFORM PLAN

Hong Kong is basically a bureaucratic polity wherein public decision-making is in the hands of a bureaucracy made up of officials appointed by the British Crown and headed by a Governor. The Executive and Legislative Councils, consisting of officials and unofficials appointed by the Governor, assist and advise the bureaucracy in the administrative chores. They are not in a position to threaten the dominance and autonomy of the bureaucracy, whose monopoly of political power is in no way curbed by any independent political or quasi-political organizations in society. The bureaucracy is a typical monocratic organization: highly centralized, hierarchical and complex. Officials dispatched to staff local offices of major government departments lack

both financial and decision-making power. And, as these lower level officials are heavily involved in dealing with the people when implementing government policies, their lack of discretionary power to adapt official rules to the personal and individual particularities of the local people has generated widespread grievances and political alienation among the populace. In the last two decades, proposals on administrative decentralization had been put forth,² but none of them were adopted because they threatened to drastically curtail the functions and decision-making power of the bureaucracy. Moreover, these proposed reforms would inevitably inject a strong political component into the political system of Hong Kong. This input would seriously subject the bureaucracy to the kind of public pressure which it used to view with disdain and consternation.

Compared to the proposed reforms in the past, the set of reforms as announced in the White Paper are extremely moderate in the type and scope of change they want to introduce into the Colony. There are two facets in the reform scheme: one administrative and the other political. Both facets are designed to be complementary to each other, and the overall goal of the reform is directed "towards better coordination of and responsiveness by the administration at district level and towards greater participation by the inhabitants of each district."³ The administrative facet of the reform is geared to the provision of a locality-orientation in the mind of officials dispatched to local areas:⁴

[I]n each district, there should be a Management Committee of officials charged with co-ordinating and, where appropriate, monitoring the work of Government departments in the district, and ensuring that the departments should be as responsive as practicable to district needs and wishes.

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More specifically,⁵

the District Management Committees will consist of Government officers from departments most closely concerned with the provision of services in the districts and any problems in them. As the main function of the District Management Committees will be to provide a forum for inter-departmental consultation and co-ordination to ensure that district needs are met and district problems are resolved more effectively, the Government will ensure that departmental representatives appointed to the Committees are at an appropriate level, to enable them to speak authoritatively and, where possible, to act upon all departmental matters affecting the district. The Chairman of the District Management Committee will be, in the urban area, the City District Commissioner of the district, . . .

In the districts themselves, which will be 10 in number in the urban areas,⁶

representatives of each district should be appointed to join the key members of the Management Committee to form a District Board to advise on the whole field of administration.

Furthermore, an elected element will be added to these Boards, though numerically it is inferior and cannot be the dominant voice there. The electoral franchise will be extended to all adults over the age of 21 and who have resided in Hong Kong for 7 years. Any registered voter who has been ordinarily resident in Hong Kong for a minimum of 10 years will be able to stand as a candidate for election to the Boards. And there will be no requirement for a candidate to be resident in the constituency for which he stands. The first elections to the District Boards will be held in stages in March and September 1982. The normal term of office for elected members will be 3 years. The chairman of the District Board will initially be an official of the Home Affairs Department, but, as soon as practicable, the District Board will be allowed to elect a chairman from its members.

According to the White Paper,⁷

- The role of the District Boards will remain mainly advisory . . . and they will have the following terms of reference:
- (a) to advise on matters affecting the well-being of people living in the district and those working there;
 - (b) to advise on the provision and use of public facilities and services within the district;
 - (c) to advise on the adequacy and priorities of Government programmes for the district;
 - (d) to advise on the use of public funds allocated to the district for local public works and community activities;
 - (e) to undertake, where funds are made available for the purpose, minor environmental improvements within the district; and
 - (f) to undertake, where funds are made available for the purpose, the promotion of recreational and cultural activities within the district.

The role of the District Boards is extremely limited, and it is not granted the requisite executive power to make its will count in the Management Committee of the officials. Since it is confined tightly to an advisory function should a District Board consider that the response to its advice from the District Management Committee is unsatisfactory, its only recourse will be to bring the matter to the attention of the Director of Home Affairs, a high-ranking official in the administrative hierarchy. But there is no formal guarantee that the latter will decide in its favor.

THE GOALS AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE REFORM

The goals of the local administrative reform outlined in the White Paper are deliberately vague, general and brief. It reflects the overly wary attitude of the government toward the reform effort. Couched in this way, it allows the government to maintain the flexibility which it

wants in order to adjust the reform efforts to the changing socio-political realities of Hong Kong, and the unpredictable reaction of the people to the new arrangements once they are set into motion. The explicit goals of the reform are phrased as "to improve the impact of administration at the district level and to stimulate a greater degree of local participation in it,"⁸ or "to improve district administration and to provide greater opportunities for public consultation and participation in administration at the district level."⁹

Behind these lofty and idealistic statements, however, we can detect several other goals which the reform is expected to accomplish. In order to lay bare these implicit goals of the reform plan, we have to look into the socio-political reality of Hong Kong and the momentous changes it has undergone in the last several decades. The local administrative reform is scheduled by the government to adapt the administrative apparatus more closely in line with the changing environment which it is expected to manage with efficiency and effectiveness.

(1) Despite its vociferously professed principles of economic laissez-faire and social non-interventionism, the growing complexity of the urban society of Hong Kong, the rising aspirations of the common people and the increasing incapability of the Chinese society to cater to the needs of its members have forced the government to play an increasingly active role in planning and delivering public resources and services on an ever-increasing scale. This expansion of the public sector is reflected both in the size of expenditure of the bureaucracy and the number of civil servants. Between 1951/52 and 1965/66, government

expenditure in Hong Kong, both in the aggregate or on a per capita basis, and in money or in real terms, rose faster than GDP and showed lesser fluctuation. There was a pause in the growth of government expenditure between 1965/66 and 1970/71. After the 1967 riot, the government took on a more active role as service provider. Since 1970/71, the upward trend in government expenditure growth was again resumed. Concomitant with the expansion of the service role of the government is the dramatic increase in the size of the bureaucratic establishment. The number of government employees rose from a low of 23,867 in 1955 to a high of 141,700 in 1980. The expansion of the functions and activities of the government inevitably raises various issues revolving around the performance and efficiency of the bureaucracy.

In a monocratic bureaucracy, the expansion in functions creates a condition of administrative overload at the center, a condition which could only be relieved by delegating functions and decision-making discretion downward along the hierarchy. The expansion of functions in a monocratic bureaucracy will also generate conditions of inadequate information flow within the administration, making it difficult for the center to formulate intelligent policies, to make optimal choices and to control or monitor the performance of lower- and middle-level civil servants. Both of these effects exert a detrimental impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of the government.

As the legitimacy of the Hong Kong government depends to a considerable extent on its performance, bureaucratic expansion and its attendant problems are issues of serious concern. Attempts have been

made since the mid-1970s, upon recommendation of the McKinsey Report, to restructure the administration so as to upgrade its capacity to make comprehensive and long-term policies. One of the major goals of the local administrative reform is to draw the government closer to the people by exposing the periphery of the bureaucracy to the needs and demands of the populace. While preserving the structure of the bureaucratic center and its decision-making prerogatives intact, it is hoped that administrative reform at the margin (i.e., at the local level) will enhance the information acquisition capability of the government and enable it to make prompt administrative response to local exigencies. By mildly subjecting local officials to local pressure, it is also hoped that the problem of bureaucratic control of the lower-level officials within the bureaucracy will be partially solved.

(2) Transformations in Chinese society itself have gradually resulted in the erosion of the linkage mechanisms between the government and the governed. Modernization has led to the decline of the traditionalistic voluntary associations, such as clansmen associations, trades associations, district associations and kaifong (neighborhood) associations, which in the past played a mediating role in the political system of Hong Kong. Admittedly these organizations and their leaders perform a role subordinate to that of the bureaucracy, their functions being confined primarily to the downward transmission of the wishes and policies of the government to the populace, and exercising some sort of control on their political and social behavior. The decline in the status, leadership talent and organizational vitality of this intermediary layer, however,

widens the social distance between the government and the governed. This widening gap between the two parties is not bridged by the rise of the modern Chinese elite, which is the product of industrialization and expansion of educational opportunities. Though relatively active in social participation, the modern elite are more involved in voluntary activities which serve primarily their professional and business interests.

They in general lack the organizational ties which bind them to the common people. Since 1967, the government has been more active in establishing ties with the governed, and they took the forms of City District Officers, Office of the Unofficial Members of the Executive and Legislative Councils, and Mutual Aid Committees in the high-rise residential buildings.¹⁰ However, none of them is granted the necessary authority and resources to enable them to become effective intermediary institutions. As the process of decay of the traditionalistic mediating institutions is expected to continue unabated, the District Boards thus represent the attempt on the part of the government to install institutions of this kind by means of administrative fiat. It is also expected that the District Boards, once in existence, will lead to the formation of new community organizations, as well as the strengthening of the decadent ones, and thus inject new life into the voluntary sector of the Chinese society. It is also expected that through the rise of community organizations and community leaders at the district level, the government will be able to 'mobilize' the people in the districts into activities which are complementary to or supportive of official policies. In such a fashion, administrative expenses can be reduced by means of increased voluntary

effort and a sense of participation can be cultivated amongst the people who take part in these activities.

(3) There is also the goal of depoliticization implicit in the reform plan. In the last decade or so, Hong Kong has been the proliferation of various small-scale, issue-related, geographically-confined and short-lived movements which are directed to the bureaucracy and are reactions to the implementation of specific government policies. These movements, whose participants are drawn largely from the disadvantaged sector of society, are particularly sporadic, fragmented and erratic in character because of the absence of political institutions in Hong Kong which can aggregate political interests and hence exert restraining and coordinating effects on them. From a comparative perspective these movements are but minor political events which have minimal repercussions on the legitimacy or stability of the political system. They are however a cause of concern to a bureaucracy which so far demonstrates low political sensitivity and is unaccustomed to challenge and protest from the ranks of the common people. The purpose of local administrative reform is to provide focal points (the Management Committees and the District Boards) in the districts for the political forces there to coalesce and eventually to defuse them locally without allowing them to spill over into larger political arenas. If political agitation can be localized at the district level, the bureaucratic center will be relieved of the burden of administrative overload and hence can devote more time and resources to broader policy issues.

(4) The symbolic aspects of local administrative reform cannot be discounted. The Hong Kong government always prides itself on what it has done for the Hong Kong people. This self-congratulatory attitude is not groundless when we take into account the economic prosperity, political stability and social freedom which the people of Hong Kong have enjoyed in the last three decades. Nevertheless, the fact that public decision-making power is controlled in the hands of a small group of expatriate officials who cannot be held accountable for their actions, nor removed from office, by the governed has generated widespread feelings of powerlessness and alienation amongst the people, especially those who are young and educated. Local administrative reform, while leaving the power of the bureaucratic center totally untouched, does provide some channels for political participation to the public, even though these channels are severely circumscribed and their effectiveness highly questionable. The symbolic significance of universal adult suffrage far outweighs its substantive significance and real impact, as it is deliberately designed to mollify an alienated population without altering the real balance of power.

(5) As acknowledged by the government itself, local administrative reform is also expected to fill the political vacuum created as a consequence of the large-scale internal movements of people and the establishment of new urban settlements in the Colony. The rise of new towns and new housing estates and the movement of people to populate them have torn asunder old and well-established social ties and community leadership structures. The maintenance of order and stability in the new settlements,

together with the need for more effective delivery of public services to the new settlers, requires that these people be incorporated into some organizational structures, however loose-knit they are. This concern for the damaging effects of political vacuum in the new settlements is all the more urgent because the government fears the infiltration of secret society elements and other politically subversive forces into the unorganized communities, thus posing a threat to the authorities. Furthermore, through the District Boards, 'co-operative' leaders in the localities can be spotted and cultivated, and their support of the government enlisted. On the other hand, they can also be used by the government to co-opt 'unco-operative' leaders and radical activists into the official fold.

In short, the local administrative reform formulated by the government can be viewed as an effort by a bureaucratic administration to increase political responsiveness, administrative efficiency and citizen participation within the confines of a bureaucratic polity wherein political power is controlled by an autonomous and dominant bureaucracy. These reform efforts are instigated by the changing socio-political reality of Hong Kong which is characterized by an increasingly costly and inefficient administrative apparatus, and a society with a deteriorating intermediary structure. Local administrative reform is hence a two-pronged approach to take on administrative and political issues at the same time.

ADMINISTRATIVE DECONCENTRATION: STRUCTURAL INADEQUACIES

The kind of changes envisaged in local administration bears some resemblance to the concept of corporate planning which has inspired the local governmental reforms in England in the last decade or so.¹¹ In fact, some of the high-ranking government officials, in introducing the content of the White Paper to the public, have made occasional reference to this concept. Nevertheless, it can easily be discerned that the reforms to be implemented in Hong Kong are indisputably a much watered-down version of corporate planning, because the Management Committee, supposedly the administrative repository of corporate planning at the local level, is not endowed with the necessary resources, structural prerequisites and authority to put the concept into effect. According to Hambleton,¹²

Corporate planning in local government takes many forms so that definitions cannot be categorical. Generally speaking, however, we can say that a corporate approach means taking an overall view of a local authority's activities and the way they relate to the changing needs and problems of its area. More specifically it involves the local authority developing management and political processes and structures which will enable it to plan, control and review its activities as a whole to satisfy the needs of the people in its area to the maximum extent consistent with available resources. Thus, the two words 'corporate planning' communicate two fundamental ideas - that the local authority should consider its resources and activities as a corporate whole and that it should plan and review them in relation to the needs and problems of its environment. . . . [T]his tradition sees the central task of the authority as the provision of separate services directed at essentially separate problems. Further, it views the local authority as the passive administrative agent of central government - an agent which is incapable of mapping out its own future. Corporate planning presents a firm challenge to both of these traditions.

The Management Committee is a far cry from what is ordinarily understood as a local government. Being dependent on the administrative center for personnel, policy guidelines and financial resources, and subject to its sanctions and control, it cannot be an autonomous administrative/political body which makes and implements policies specifically geared to the needs and requirements of a particular locality. The best it can do, under the proposed reform format, is to afford the locally-assigned officials the chance to exchange views, to learn about one another's decision-making constraints and to coordinate one another's actions as far as their minimal discretionary power and personal inclinations would allow. Even so, however, administrative efficiency and responsiveness may not be dramatically improved because the necessary administrative guidelines or regulations (which, by precisely spelling out the powers, functions, and relationships between these officials, make coordination possible) are lacking. Nor is the call for better coordination among officials bolstered by effective sanctions and administrative orders. It is highly possible that, given the overriding loyalty of locally-assigned officials to their own departments, the rampant departmental discord which so characterizes the administrative center will be replicated at the lower levels.¹³

The effectiveness of the Management Committee will also be seriously marred by the inadequate structural reform which is planned for the administration. Short of a more drastic reorganization of the departments and a more goal-directed redefinition of departmental functions, the old woes of the bureaucracy, which necessitate the local

administrative reform in the first place, will continue to perpetuate themselves and plague the government. A large number of activities which should be the responsibility of the government will continue to be neglected.¹⁴

The chairman of the Management Committee is not in a position to exercise directive power in this administrative body. As no redistribution of power between departments or officials will be made, the District Commissioner, as the representative from the Home Affairs Department, can only rely on his persuasive skill and the goodwill of his fellow officials to get the coordinative job done. Under such circumstances, the formulation of long-range, comprehensive plans for a district is highly unlikely. Moreover, given the current pattern of rotation of senior officials between offices in the government, the District Officer or Commissioner would be in no mood to antagonize officials from other departments to whose ranks he might someday be assigned. As John Walden, the former Director of Home Affairs who retired in 1980, pointed out:¹⁵

The CDO [City District Officer] Scheme for all its other good points (and they are many) from the very outset failed to grasp the nettle of bureaucratic obduracy. As a matter of policy CDOs were given neither rank to influence, nor power to direct, nor executive authority to coordinate. They were expected to secure the co-operation of their colleagues in other departments in the solution of local problems by the exercise of superior intelligence and by fostering inter-departmental goodwill.

In fact, the most critical factor which would determine the success or failure of the local administrative reform lies in the

administrative culture of the locally-assigned officials. Hong Kong officials are notorious for their snobbishness, complacency, superciliousness and rigidity in rule application, and these woes are doubly visible among lower officials, who are in close touch with the ordinary people. In many cases, the lack of responsiveness on the part of government officials is not due to the lack of communication or information, but the lack of the will and inclination to do so. While we cannot expect these elitist orientations on the part of administrators to be weeded out overnight, their exposure to local opinion as a result of local administrative reform will certainly produce beneficial results. Be that as it may, the fact that even under the proposed administrative format the people are not yet in a position to remove or penalize intransigent public officials would mean that these officials will still be under no compulsion to 'reform' themselves. If, under the new system, they are given even more responsibilities than before, governmental responsiveness might in some cases suffer as the less responsive officials are now given additional discretionary power.

That the term 'locally-assigned official' is used here instead of the more common term 'local official' is deliberate. It is used to underscore the point that in Hong Kong there is no official whose career is based on service to a local community over a long-term basis. As they are usually shifted from one district to another, there is virtually no 'locality-orientation' among the Hong Kong officials. One of the derivatives of this rotation system is that within the bureaucracy itself, local interests are not represented by or personified in particular

officials who have direct linkage or identification with particular localities. This situation is not going to be redressed by the reform plan issued. Consequently, even though the Management Committee and the locally-assigned officials are meant to be targets for local politics to coalesce, the lack of a locality-orientation among these officials and their brief assignments will not only make it difficult to realize, but might even unnecessarily inject an element of instability into the local political arena. The latter is possible because changes in senior locally-assigned officials, given their centrality in local politics, would bring about changes in political alignments at the local level. Nonetheless, in view of the low degree of autonomy of locally-assigned officials, this concern over 'instability' should not be overemphasized.

In addition to rendering the government more responsive to the people in the districts, the Management Committee as a collective entity is created in order to make local administration more directly responsive to the center and more instrumentally linked to central priorities and goals. If it functions well, it is expected to enable the center to have its policies and wishes implemented more successfully without being so severely distorted that the anticipated policy impact is deflected. However, being far from a corporate entity with a clear hierarchical structure (which can be held accountable for its performance by the center), it is not readily amenable to effective quality control by it. Because there is no authority to make significant decisions in the localities, it is reasonable to expect that many issues, some quite minor, will still have to be channelled back to the center for action

to be taken. The Management Committee might be able to ameliorate a little bit the problem of administrative overload at the center. However, the bulk of decision-making will remain there, though it might be made a little easier due to the greater amount of information received from below.

It should also be pointed out that the division of the urban area into 10 administrative districts seems to have been made quite arbitrarily, and is not a result of scientific analysis of population settlement patterns (the socio-geographical criterion). Nor are the requirements for effective and efficient delivery of services (the functional criterion, taking into account the types of services delivered and the scale of their delivery) carefully appraised. During the last several years, administrative deconcentration has been adopted by some government departments with the establishment of regional offices, but the type of geographical divisions these departments sought varies. With the setting up of the 10 administrative districts, which tend to accord with the conventional conception of the geographical division of urban Hong Kong, it might be expected that most of the important government departments would deconcentrate their functions in conformity with these district divisions. Nevertheless, at this point it is difficult to tell to what extent do these district divisions represent the optimal geographical criterion for the production and distribution of public services. Judging from current public reactions to the government's output and mode of service delivery, many things will need to be improved.

All in all, the administrative component of the reform exercise suffers from the fact that changes are attempted at the local level while the center is left untouched. To a certain extent these twin goals can be achieved if central and local administrations can be clearly separated and local administration is granted sufficient autonomy to deal with local problems more swiftly and effectively and is held by the local people to be solely responsible for success or failure in policy making and implementation. In the case of reform in Hong Kong, it does not seem to be true that local politics can be absorbed largely by the local administrative framework and that the center can be relieved of cumbersome, routine and minor decision-making overload. The situation might improve a bit, but the core of the problem will remain.

THE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION COMPONENT:
STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON 'GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY'

In a certain sense, the local administrative reform intentionally sets out to 'democratize' politics at the local level while simultaneously confining it there. The local people and local celebrities are encouraged to participate along with locally-assigned officials in an advisory capacity for mundane decision-making which affects their districts. However, they are largely denied the right to partake in decision-making on substantive issues either within the districts or the Colony as a whole. They do not have the right to hold the locally-assigned officials accountable for their behavior, nor can they dismiss these officials through votes of no confidence.

In fact, the vehicle through which public participation in the districts is channelled - the District Board - was created more as an administrative adjunct to the Management Committee than as a policy making institution from which the Management Committee receives its legitimacy. The District Boards, once in existence, would legitimize the decisions of the local officials (and indirectly the central officials) and would make the implementation of official plans easier by preparing the public in advance. If, as John Walden disclosed, the role of the CDDs is "to use their influence to persuade dissenting elements in the community to accept unpopular decisions, not to speak out for them in opposing them,"¹⁶ then the District Boards would function as a mechanism through which the government can transmit its policy intentions to the people. Of course we are not denying the feedback function of the District Boards and their role in making government more responsive. Given the composition of the District Boards and their terms of reference, as well as the overall political system of Hong Kong, the District Boards can only be considered a subsidiary body in the new local administrative framework.

Why the need for the District Boards? In a society which is undergoing increasing political and social atomization, and the consequent decay of its intermediary structure, government is made much more difficult. This is because of information deficiencies, inability to anticipate and structure the behavior of the multitude of common people through viable organizational devices, and the absence of social control on those who

would resort to devious means to combat government policies and their implementation. As pointed out rightly by Cockburn:¹⁷

It would be a disruptive and uncomfortable experience for officers and councillors unless there were some form of organisation into which the chaos of popular action could be structured. An interface of some kind was needed to mediate between people in great numbers and the state in its unity, a device to order and transmit the information flowing between population and local state.

The functions of the District Board are several. First, it can be used as the focal institution in the district and its existence will provide the framework to promote the rise of community organizations which would agree with its aims and integrate themselves with it. Second, the District Board purports to 'focalize' politics in the district and co-opt local leaders and activists. In this way it is hoped that local political activities will be 'regularized', 'institutionalized', and directed into official channels, thereby reducing the incidence of erratic collective action which make headlines in Hong Kong's newspapers and create demand overload at the bureaucratic center. Third, the District Board is expected to foster a 'corporate' community point of view to complement that of the local administration. The 'corporate' community point of view will hopefully enhance administrative performance since it simplifies and aggregates the diverse demands and opinions in the locality and presents a package of policy suggestions to the administrators. Much time and effort can thus be saved from having to deal with a large number of individual and group demands which would create serious administrative overload and delay.

Fourth, the District Board can also have a mobilizing function. One of the major problems which currently trouble the administration is the fact that, despite its continual expansion, its capacity - in terms of personnel and resources - to deliver services and resolve social problems (when put against the backdrop of ever-growing needs), in actuality declines. If the District Board can assume some quasi-executive functions on behalf of the administration, mobilize the local people to engage in activities which supplement those of the administration, or fill in the gaps in the administrative output, both the performance and the public image of the government will be improved. Fifth, through participation in the election of the District Board and in its activities, a sense of community identification and involvement on the part of the local people will be fostered. Consequently, the unsettling sense of political and social alienation will hopefully be alleviated.

Even granted that these lofty goals might theoretically be achieved through administrative means, it is highly doubtful that, with the presently conceived arrangements, these goals can in fact be reached. The major deficiency in the 'participative' component of the local administrative reform lies in the structural weakness and dependency of the District Board. Underlying these structural deficiencies is the misperception on the part of the government of the salient issues which afflict Hong Kong society and its people, the tendency of the government to confine the role of the District Board to that of a mere administrative adjunct, and to limit its impact, however minimal, within the localities (when in fact the absence of viable local governments would make it virtually impossible to occur).

(1) Without the capacity to cultivate independent sources of revenue and without the sole authority to make decisions which impact on a locality, the District Board is simply a junior and powerless partner in the local administrative game. Admittedly, both out of goodwill and a proclivity on the part of locally-assigned officials to placate the complaints of the Board members (for fear that otherwise their performance will be adversely evaluated by higher-level officials) will make local officials responsive to the Board's suggestions to a certain extent. Nevertheless, being not subject to removal or financial control by the Board, it would not seem possible that the Board can exercise any effective supervisory and decision-making role in local administration. The most that the Board can do which involves some policy making function is to participate in the design and implementation of some community projects (using the funds granted to it by the government) and to redress some of the grievances of local individuals. Nevertheless, the amount of funds under the control of the Board is so pitifully small that it would be insufficient to enhance the prestige and capability of this advisory body through financial means.

(2) Even within the District Board, the voice of the elected members is subordinate to that of the officials and the appointed members. The latter two parties would in general identify with the government. When the institution of a universal adult franchise is coupled with the relative insignificance of the elected members, it is highly unlikely that the voters' interests will be sufficiently aroused to take them to the voting booths. Under these circumstances, it is questionable to what

extent new community organizations will be formed and old community organizations be strengthened and then ally their activities and goals to the electoral process in the district. If this analysis proves to be correct, the outcome of building community organizations which is intended to arise from the reform will not be particularly encouraging.

(3) At the present stage of development in Hong Kong, in view of the objective political and social situation, a new breed of social leadership dedicated to serving the society and to fill in the intermediary gap in the political system is sorely needed. One essential requirement for this new leadership, in order for it to be viable and effective, is its organizational basis. One inevitable result of the local administrative reform is to fragment the political arena of Hong Kong into various district political arenas, and the political ambitions and functions of the aspiring leaders will hence be highly constrained. Further, given the absence of channels of political mobility or career-building in a bureaucratic polity, and the apparent intention of the government to localize politics, it is quite unlikely that capable persons with the necessary political clout would find the District Board sufficiently attractive as a step to a better political (and economic) future for themselves.

What sort of local leadership should be expected as a result of local administrative reform? While it is always risky to foretell something that has yet to happen, it is still possible to venture some reasonable guesses. In the first place, though the explicit motive which prompts the reform is to enable the government to forge more viable

linkages with the vast majority of common people, this planned structure of District Boards is not likely to result in the rise of a competent local leadership which can do the job. Since, on the average, a district in Hong Kong is quite large in terms of population (with several hundred thousand residents per district), it is very difficult for people with lower socio-economic background to get themselves elected without the support of influential community organizations. A further point to note is that in a nonparticipant and apathetic population, even community organizations will find it impossible to canvass the district and 'pull' the voters to the voting booths. Consequently, we can expect two types of electoral candidates who can take advantage of the new system: those who enjoy publicity in the locality and in the Hong Kong society as a whole, and those whose affiliation with community organizations or party-like organizations will allow them to get elected by means of a small number of votes casted by these organizational members and sympathizers. In other words, they would most likely be people in high socio-economic categories who usually have more organizational affiliations. Their linkage with the common people would only be nominal and minimal. Moreover, individuals in lower socio-economic categories will be discouraged from running as candidates for membership in District Boards. While demanding a lot of time and effort, their effort is compensated only by meagre financial subsidies, which are not enough to release them from their regular job. And, in view of the condition of organizational decay in the districts and the poor prospect of organizational revival, these elected members cannot depend on organizational devices to learn about

the conditions in the districts or the demands and needs of the populace. Their ability to formulate good community policy packages and a community point of view will correspondingly be diminished. This, when coupled with the expected low leadership caliber that would be expected to enter into the electoral process, projects a rather dismal picture for the elected component of the local administrative reform.

(4) Even if the elected members of the District Boards are determined to play a more active role in district administration, they would find themselves increasingly handicapped to do so. In a very real sense, corporate planning and community participation in decision-making are contradictory. Whilst the former requires technical and rational criteria for making decisions and evaluating policy impact, the latter is political and 'irrational'. The increasing complexity of urban administration and the incessant demand of the bureaucratic center for efficiency and technological innovation would make the political process which have to be dealt with increasingly repugnant to the local officials. Gradually, the non-professional elected members of the District Boards (and many of the appointed unofficials as well) would find themselves incapable of understanding or participating in a decision-making process which could be highly professional and technical in character and quite time-consuming. Politics within the District Boards would become more and more 'undemocratic', and the role of the elected members will be confined to peripheral issues and nonessential matters, while major decisions will be left in the hands of local and central officials.

(5) Another major factor which detracts from the usefulness of the District Boards is the relevance of the district as a political arena in Hong Kong. Two aspects of this factor can be singled out for consideration. In the first place, the sense of community identification amongst the Hong Kong Chinese is extremely low, and projects which attempt to involve the local people in community affairs are distinctive for their abject failure.¹⁸ The districts as conceived in the local administrative reform do not represent the boundaries of discrete, 'natural' communities. It can of course be argued that the formation of the District Boards into decision-making units with financial muscle to dispense material rewards would turn each district into a political arena wherein competition for public money and projects will rage among interest groups. But the constitution of the District Boards, as we can see easily, does not provide the opportunity for such political spoils and patronage. Consequently, it is quite difficult, under these conditions, for the District Boards to promote community identification and solidarity and to serve as the focal point for local politics, which would remain erratic and noninstitutionalized. It can also be envisioned that if the District Boards are allowed to become independent political actors which participate in a Colonywide political arena and compete for public resources with one another, community identification and involvement will be increased through inter-community conflict and the sheer incentive to acquire as much resources as possible for one's community. But in the case of Hong Kong this again will not be tolerated nor should it be tolerated. If this is allowed to occur, public resources will inevitably be channelled inequitably

into neighborhoods with stronger political muscle to flex, and they not unexpectedly would be those with residents in the higher socio-economic categories. That would magnify the already glaring inequalities between the haves and have-nots in the Colony. It will not be tolerated because this would unnecessarily expand the political arena in Hong Kong, or, in other words, politicize it. What kind of political consequences would thus be generated would be highly unpredictable, and may not be easily controllable. More to the point, it runs against the depoliticization motive which underlies the reform effort.

Another aspect of the problem is related to the types of salient issues which can be found in Hong Kong today. A cursory glance at the current situation will lead to the conclusion that a majority of these issues are either society-wide issues or individual issues. The former include issues which would require global consideration and Colonywide standardization of treatment, necessitate heavy financial investment, generate economies of scale in the process of service delivery, and demand comprehensive planning. These would include educational policy, social welfare, transportation and those ad hoc, time-bound issues which draw widespread attention from the public and require general policy revisions. For these general issues, the district administrative apparatus is not the appropriate instrument of resolution. The latter type of issues affect largely an individual and his family, and would require more flexible policy implementation and personal considerations. In terms of administrative practice, these more individualistic, idiosyncratic problems would necessitate an increase in the number of channels

of communication between officials and the people, more authority and discretionary decision-making power in the hands of lower-level officials, and a more sympathetic and service- or people-oriented administrative culture. The local administrative reform as presently conceived is limited in its ability to create these favorable conditions. As a result, we would expect no demonstrative decrease in the small-scale collective actions (protests, petitions, sit-ins, publicity campaigns, mass meetings) which revolve around individual or group demands, and they would continue to be directed to the administrative center for consideration. On the other hand, whether the general demands and needs will be met by the government successfully will depend ultimately on the resources of the government and its policy priorities. Hence, the role to be played by the District Boards here must be limited except as a forum wherein general issues (as against specific district issues) are discussed and local opinion on these issues expressed.

In spite of the fact that the District Boards will be assigned to play a limited role in local administration, it is always possible that they will go on to assume some unexpected functions which may be a cause of consternation for the government. Some elected members might harbor political ambitions which, finding no outlet in this local straitjacket, will engender feelings of frustration and hostility. They would also compensate for their lack of decision-making power by issuing idealistic statements and venting their anger by being overly critical of the government, or they might sponsor activities against the government which would have great publicity value. These are done both to appeal to their

constituents and to acquire for themselves the Colonywide political stature which is denied them by their limited political role. If this is to happen, the District Boards will then no longer be district advisory bodies alone but also institutions wherein public opinion on general issues is articulated and publicized. Certainly the administration is powerful enough to impose stringent control over this possible outcome. However, once this 'suppressive' power is exercised by the government, it will have negative effects on the legitimacy and prestige of the District Boards.

CONCLUSION

Local administrative reform as an instrument to cope with the burning issues currently plaguing the government and the people of Hong Kong is structurally inadequate. It might serve to alleviate some of the existing woes, but is in no position to eliminate them.

The main dilemmas that torment the government in its reform effort are several, and their partial resolutions have resulted in a reform plan which is timid in its approach, ambiguous in its goals and misplaced in its means. It sets out to improve the efficiency and performance of the administration but comes short of drastically reorganizing it to combat functional fragmentation, departmentalism, overcentralization and an elitist administrative ethos. Partial deconcentration is no panacea for a 'bureaucratic sickness' which is deep-rooted and culturally based.

The community participation approach is so devised that whilst it is supposed to promote community organization and involvement, the relative insignificance of community issues and the limited function of the District Boards will have a minimal impact on citizen participation. Furthermore, the reform is not favorable to the emergence of an effective intermediary leadership stratum which will replace the old, decadent one.

Government is not yet ready to radically 'democratize' the political system of Hong Kong. Also, democratic participation and decision-making have not yet been the general demand of the people or the battle-cry of strong political groups. Consequently, local administrative reform as presently conceived is somewhat puzzling. Even though there is a pervasive sense of powerlessness among the young and educated, and this feeling is indeed a legitimate cause of concern to the government, some other means than local administrative reform could be more effective in involving them in public policy making. While the local administrative reform does not distinguish between those with high and low needs for participation, it might end up disappointing both groups of people.

In order to cope with the problems which confront Hong Kong today, several points have to be considered. First, some of these problems have to do with the discrepancies between the policy priorities of the government and the people. In other words, acute and real conflicts of interests between the colonial government and the Chinese people are involved, such as the case of land policy. The resolution of these problems will test the will and determination of both the government and

the governed, but of utmost importance is the extent to which the government is prepared to go to 'sacrifice' some of its interests for the sake of social and political stability.

Second, while recognizing the communication gap between the government and the people as an important factor impairing administrative efficiency and performance, the internal organization of the bureaucracy is also contributing. Steps to 'democratize' interpersonal relationships, give more emphasis to programme design and evaluation, create more flexible deployment of personnel and resources and subject particular officials (especially those in middle and lower ranks) to public scrutiny and sanction are essential to rectify the situation. Unfortunately, the government has so long been unable to muster sufficient incentive to do this or to overcome the intense internal opposition which such a reorganization will spark off.

Third, in a lowly organized society where material and familial interests reign supreme,¹⁹ any attempt to 'mobilize' the people to engage in quasi-executive or self-help programmes will be doomed to fail unless grand-scale efforts on the part of the government are launched. This would however go beyond its capability. In view of an apathetic populace, a resource-scarce government, and great social distance between the two, methods to influence the people so that they identify with the values and goals of the government, and to deliver services more in conformity with their needs, have to abide by several principles: (1) strong initiative on the part of the people should not be deemed a

necessity; (2) intense effort to arouse the people should be avoided; (3) when contact with the people has to be made, it is essential to maximize the scope of coverage, i.e., to maximize the number of people reached per unit of expenditure; (4) the intermediaries between the two parties should be able to win the confidence of the people because of their expertise or specialized knowledge (and not only because of their organizational affiliations);²⁰ (5) when demands for 'private goods' from specific individuals or groups are received, steps should be taken to ensure as far as possible that they be met speedily and directly. This would create a sense of political satisfaction in the people's mind and generate confidence in the government. Putting these criteria into effect, it would require that the government widen its contact points with the people by means of opinion surveys (to be undertaken continuously), opinion leaders, officials and their representatives who go directly to the people frequently to seek their opinions, 'detached' leaders and professionals who are not seen as yes-men by the people, and a flexible administrative structure which can respond to individualistic needs efficiently. In comparison with democratic political procedures, these measures which the government adopts to demonstrate that it cares for the people and is prepared to cater to their needs are of course inferior both as an ideal and in practice. Nevertheless, when combined with bureaucratic reorganization and the willingness of the government to reorient its policy priorities to make them more compatible with societal conceptions, these measures should be more effective than local administrative reform which appears to promise very much but in fact delivers very little.

To conclude, when viewed as a dynamic process, local administrative reform as presently conceived represents a good starting point. However, when taken alone, its effectiveness is limited. Not only should administrative reform be carried further, but other steps must also be taken to supplement, if not replace, it. It is certainly possible that local administrative reform will serve as the catalyst for other more radical changes which have yet to come.

NOTES

- ¹Hong Kong Government Printer, 1981.
- ²See N.J. Miners, The Government and Politics of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 190-199.
- ³District Administration in Hong Kong, p. 3.
- ⁴Ibid, p. 3.
- ⁵Ibid, p. 7.
- ⁶Ibid, p. 3.
- ⁷Ibid, p. 10.
- ⁸Ibid, p. 4.
- ⁹Ibid, p. 27.
- ¹⁰See Lau Siu-kai, "The Government, Intermediate Organizations and Grassroots Politics in Hong Kong," Asian Survey, 21, 8 (August 1981), pp. 365-384.
- ¹¹See, for example, R.A.W. Rhodes, "Ordering Urban Change: Corporate Planning in the Government of English Cities," in Jacques Lagroye and Vincent Wright (eds.), Local Government in Britain and France: Problems and Prospects (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), pp. 127-49; and John Dearlove, The Reorganisation of British Local Government: Old Orthodoxies and a Political Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
- ¹²Robin Hambleton, Policy Planning and Local Government (London: Hutchinson, 1978), pp. 44-45.
- ¹³James Hayes, "Building a Community in the New Town: A Management Relationship with the New Population," in Leung Chi-keung, J.W. Cushman and Wang Gungwu (eds.), Hong Kong: Dilemmas of Growth (Canberra: Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University and Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1980), pp. 309-40.

- ¹⁴ Douglas W. Sparks, Unity as Power: The Teochiu of Hong Kong (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1978), pp. 114-115.
- ¹⁵ South China Morning Post [Hong Kong], July 17, 1981.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Cynthia Cockburn, The Local State: Management of Cities and People (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p. 105.
- ¹⁸ For example, see G.C.P. Riches, Community Development in Hong Kong: Sau Mau Ping, A Case Study (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1973); and also his Urban Community Centres and Community Development: Hong Kong and Singapore (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1973).
- ¹⁹ Lau Siu-kai, "Utilitarianistic Familism: The Basis of Political Stability," in Ambrose Y.C. King and Rance P.L. Lee (eds.) Social Life and Development in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1981), pp. 195-216; and also his "Chinese Familism in an Urban-Industrial Setting: The Case of Hong Kong," Journal of Marriage and the Family (in press).
- ²⁰ Eugene Litwak and Henry J. Meyer, "A Balance Theory of Coordination between Bureaucratic Organizations and Community Primary Groups," Administrative Science Quarterly, 11 (June 1966), pp. 31-58.