



Occasional Paper No. 9

Centre for Hong Kong Studies

香港研究中心

September, 1985

Centre for Hong Kong Studies

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**Hong Kong after the Sino-British Agreement:
Limits to Institutional Change in a Dependent Polity**

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This paper was subsequently published as:

Lau, Siu-kai and Hsin-chi Kuan. 1986. "Hong Kong after the Sino-British Agreement: The Limits to Change," *Pacific Affairs*, 59(2):214–236.

HONG KONG AFTER THE SINO–BRITISH AGREEMENT:

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After the tortuous and agonizing process of the Sino-British negotiation over the future of Hong Kong was ultimately drawn to an end in 1984 with the signing of the Sino-British Agreement,¹ Hong Kong was forced willy-nilly into a potentially turbulent period of political transition. Leading all the other items in the political agenda for the transitional period is the design and implementation of the necessary changes in the political institutions to assure a smooth handover of sovereignty in 1997, as well as to preserve stability and prosperity in the next twelve years and beyond.

Granted that the political system of Hong Kong, dominated by a non-elective bureaucratic government deriving its legitimacy from the British Crown, has so far been quite effective in undergirding the post-War development of Hong Kong, and that both China and Britain have unequivocally declared their determination to maintain its status quo, the issue of political reform should on the surface of it be noncontroversial. Even if reforms are to be instituted, the fact that political reforms are charged with explicit social and economic missions should constrict substantially the options available to the two governments in tinkering with the existing institutions. Moreover, the political impotence of Hong Kong vis-à-vis the two governments and the weakness

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¹A Draft Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Future of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 26 September 1984).

of the political organisations of the Hong Kong people would preclude any serious political resistance to the reform plans imposed unilaterally by them. It might even be possible to say that by implementing political reforms in a top-down fashion, political reforms could serve the purposes of regulating the pattern of political organisation and mobilisation in Hong Kong, manipulating the political forces in Hong Kong in such a way as to muster support for Sino-British policies and reducing political uncertainties. Therefore, the issue of political reform should not be a prickly issue to haunt the future of the place.

Nevertheless, reality turns out to be much more complicated. In the next few years, the issue of political reform will dominate Hong Kong's political scene, and engender a relatively volatile (relative to Hong Kong's past experience) situation. Even though it can almost be certain that the issue will subside precipitously afterwards and be resolved largely in accordance with Sino-British intentions, the way by which this is done and the extent to which negative political sentiments are mollified would still have long-term implications for the political future of Hong Kong.

The illusory simplicity of the issue of political reform is afflicted with a slew of difficulties, which arise basically because the peculiar temporal-structural setting wherein the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong is decided does not furnish the conditions conducive to a smooth transition. The protracted period of transition furnished by the Sino-British Agreement, while definitely serving to avert abrupt and unsettling changes, nonetheless creates problems of its own. In

face of these difficulties, a 'master plan' of political reform for Hong Kong cannot be devised forthwith, and this is affirmed by the scantiness of the treatment given to the future political institutions of Hong Kong in the Agreement.² In order to understand the possibilities of action available to the British government, the Chinese government and the people of Hong Kong, as well as the scope of changes that can realistically be made in the existing institutional structure, it is first of all necessary to lay bare the major difficulties surrounding the issue of political reform.

(1) The first thing to note is that even though Hong Kong's political system appears to be an indispensable requisite for its post-War economic miracle, it is a system which is imposed by its colonial master and maintained by the power at its disposal. In addition, whilst Hong Kong's political structure is a colonial one in a formal-legal sense, it has been over the years and out of practical necessities greatly modified by a body of conventions, procedures, norms and organisations devised and abided by the colonial government which together have transformed Hong Kong's political structure into a comparatively unique entity

²The Agreement stipulates that the "government and legislature of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be composed of local inhabitants. The chief executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be selected by election or through consultations held locally and be appointed by the Central People's Government. Principal officials (equivalent to Secretaries) shall be nominated by the chief executive of the Hong Kong Administrative Region and appointed by the Central People's Government. The legislature of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be constituted by elections. The executive authorities shall abide by the law and shall be accountable to the legislature." See *ibid*, pp. 14-15.

considerably different from the colonial polities in the past. Furthermore, this unique polity has gained acceptance by the majority of the Hong Kong people.³ Because of this, the scheduled transfer of sovereignty to China, which espouses a different political ideology, creates the fear among the Hong Kong people that with the removal of the colonial master and his lieutenants, the existing political system can no longer be maintained. To assuage this fear, China has promised political autonomy to the Hong Kong people in the formula 'Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong.' But to translate this formula into concrete political arrangements involves converting former subjects into guardians of the system, and this necessitates some dosage of political reform. As a result, political reforms have to be introduced for the sake of preserving the basic features of the existing system. And this paradoxical requirement of meeting a conservative end by an innovative means inevitably poses serious constraints on the choices that can be made.

(2) Both China and Britain have vowed to maintain stability and prosperity in Hong Kong and both stand to profit from its continued success. However, even though both governments would recognise the limited possibilities for changing the political system of Hong Kong, there is still much room for dispute as to the specifics and timing of the

³In a survey conducted shortly before the start of the Sino-British negotiation in 1982, 63.1 per cent of the respondents regarded the existing political system of Hong Kong as by far the best under all realistic circumstances.

reforms, originating from their different interests and mutual distrust of each other. Both Britain and China know full well, as the incumbent and future political masters respectively of Hong Kong, that each side's reform plans can succeed only with the support of the other side. At the very least, Britain's plan to develop 'representative government' in Hong Kong can only have credibility if it is linked with China's promise of 'autonomy,' and the reverse is also true. This need for the two governments to act in concert does not prevent each of them from trying to capture the initiative to structure the reform process. In the 'battle of the initiative,' the advantage of Britain lies in the fact that it is the incumbent government which can translate her wishes immediately into policies. In the case of China, her strengths reside in the facts that only she can give the status of permanence to the reform measures instituted by Britain and that China can mobilize her supporters in Hong Kong to subvert Britain's reforms. In any event, with time it is certainly China that will have the upperhand in structuring the content and process of reform. Yet, out of distrust of the British government, China feels compelled to take the initiative early in the transitional period by making her intentions manifest and thus setting up a ceiling for the reform. The result would be that within two or three years after the signing of the Sino-British Agreement, the future political system of Hong Kong will be basically determined, though admittedly in a schematic form. The early determination of the future political institutions of Hong Kong might produce two major effects. First, there will be a strong conservative bias in the reforms to be instituted

simply because there is not enough time to explore innovative alternatives. Second, in view of the fact that reforms initiated from above by China and Britain will structure and regulate the formation of political forces in Hong Kong, the conservatism of the planned reform will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

(3) The bureaucratic government of Hong Kong, by virtue of its long tenure, has created as its staunch supporters powerful vested interests. Naturally the civil servants are the paramount beneficiary of the system, and so are the capitalists and professionals, who prosper under a governance of laissez-faire and non-interventionism. These vested and protected interests look upon political reform of any kind with alarm and horror. They would only welcome that kind of reform which will leave the power of the departing colonial ruler in their hands. At the same time, the intermingling promises of 'representative government,' 'Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong,' and 'political autonomy' by the British and Chinese governments have not failed to encourage the entry into the political arena activist political groups pressuring for democratisation. Even though as a political force these groups are insignificant, failing to mobilise support from the masses, they are quite capable of exploiting the free and competitive mass media of Hong Kong to press their demands and embarrass the two governments. It is extremely difficult for both governments to suppress them, at least in the interim period, for doing so would prompt others to think that the two governments are to renege on earlier promises. As such, the issue of political reform is a highly divisive one within the society of Hong

Kong. While ultimately the maintenance of the status quo in Hong Kong would require that the interests of the bureaucrats, the capitalists and the professionals be largely protected, the new political forces has at the same time to be skillfully managed.

(4) Perhaps the most difficult issue facing the two governments is that more than a century of bureaucratic rule has deprived Hong Kong of effective political leadership outside of the bureaucracy. The partial transfer of power to the local people attendant upon the transfer of sovereignty thus would encounter grave difficulties. The dearth of indigenous leadership within the bureaucracy is also a problem, though a much lesser one. Through stepped-up efforts at localisation, the problem can be largely resolved, though the morale of the largely Chinese civil servants still constitute a nagging problem. The grooming of political leaders is an altogether different matter, for it involves changes in the political system which would facilitate the rise of leaders of a sort acceptable to both Britain and China. Ideally, such leaders should be pro-capitalist, moderate in outlook, elitist but enjoying rapport with the people and friendly to both Britain and China. But in reforming the political system of Hong Kong both Britain and China are denied two critical instruments: limited electoral franchise and a system of wholesale appointment to political posts. Therefore indirect and subtle devices have to be installed to block the emergence of populist and demagogic leaders. At the same time, the process of democratisation has to follow an incremental and even faltering trajectory, perennially besetted by the possibilities of lapses. Even so, in view of the lack of trust in

leaders and politicians among the Hong Kong people and the political predominance of the Sino-British power, the development of effective local political leadership promises limited success at best.

(5) The mistrust of the British and the Chinese governments in general by the Hong Kong people constitute another impediment to smooth political reform. And this is especially true when the effect of some of the reforms is to strengthen the power of the government and by derivation threaten the social and economic freedom of the people. While the desire of the populace to participate in politics far from impressive, their determination to resist the encroachment of the government on social and economic liberty is quite persistent. Except for the expansion of the delivery of public services which carries no strings in terms of social and economic costs, the people would look askance at any governmental attempt to regulate society. That attitude adds another constraint to the range of options available to the reformers. In the last analysis, the vast majority of the people are indifferent to political reform.

The Limited Options for Britain

In spite of the fact that Britain had presided relatively successfully over the tumultuous process of decolonisation in her heterogeneous ex-colonies in the post-War era, the steps followed are however basically standardised. The opening-up of the colonial regime usually starts from the local level, then proceeds to the national legislature with the introduction of elective seats. Political parties are then encouraged,

particularly those whose leaders are sympathetic to the continuation of British economic and diplomatic interests after independence. The penultimate stage comes with the institution of a largely elected legislature, with the party or parties winning the majority or plurality of seats forming a cabinet to head the executive arm of the government. The British governor, however, still controls reserved power in areas such as military and foreign affairs, and probably also internal security. He might even have the prerogative of suspending the constitution which brings about the elected legislature and the cabinet. The end of the process of decolonisation comes at the time of independence when a new sovereign state comes into being with the full panoply of political powers.

Hong Kong, however, presents a vastly different case to the British decision-makers. This renders the well-established formula of decolonisation which had served Britain quite well in the past obsolete. For one thing, the foreclosure of the possibility of independence means that real sovereign power has to be returned to China and cannot be delegated to the Hong Kong people without the latter's manifest approval. And it is crystal clear that the promise of 'Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong' notwithstanding, China is not likely to tolerate a situation where real power is controlled by popular Hong Kong leaders who brandish political legitimacy based on an electoral mandate, whose behaviour is not amenable to control and whose attitude to China is contingent upon the whims of the electorate. Thus, the goal of decolonisation without independence necessarily holds the task of democratisation in play.

Another thing is that Britain will continue to govern Hong Kong up till 1997 and has pledged to maintain the status quo, which is defined as a stable and prosperous capitalist society, upon which the still enormous, British economic interests depend. Any rash 'democratic' reform which might frighten local and international capital, engender political instabilities, result in onerous public regulation of economic behaviour, lead to undesirable increases in welfare expenditure, alienate the entrenched bureaucratic interests and threaten financial insolvency of the government will corrode continual and effective British rule and jeopardize the fulfilment of the goal of 'exit-in-glory.' In face of possible economic difficulties ahead, springing especially from the exodus of local capital and the shrinking western markets, the British might even feel the need to strengthen the government substantially in certain areas (law enforcement, influence on public opinion, anti-corruption, revenue collection, coercion, etc.), even though the overall trend is a decline in authority and creditability of the Hong Kong government and its ability to dispense reward and punishment.

The same need for continued effective rule in the remaining twelve years in Hong Kong however also would compel the Hong Kong government to cultivate popular support domestically in order to facilitate the formulation and implementation of public policies. Accordingly a certain amount of 'democratisation' has to be introduced to demonstrate goodwill and to appease the pro-democratic forces in Hong Kong. The appeal to public support can additionally be used as a counterweight to the possible uncalled-for intervention from China,

allowing Britain some little more room for political maneuvering in the transitional period. 'Democratisation' is also deemed necessary to meet the wishes of a portion of British public opinion which sees 'democratisation' as the means to allow the Hong Kong people to be better able to stand on their own feet vis-à-vis their future communist master.

In view of the factors which pull in different directions, it is no wonder that the Hong Kong government approach the issue of political reform in a hesitant and improvised manner. Knowing full well that the return of sovereignty to China is inevitable and that the time in which Britain can maintain her initiative in political reform is quite short (soon to be taken over by China through the declaration of her own reform plans), the Hong Kong government nonetheless has been able to install some moderate reform measures, hopefully to constrain the options of China to a limited extent. However, even in the limited reforms instituted and about to be introduced, the Hong Kong government has encountered substantial resistance from various quarters based on a variety of reasons but originated ultimately from a lack of trust in the departing government.

Due to the one-track decolonisation experience of Britain, the initial steps of political reform taken by the Hong Kong government bear some faint resemblance to what had been attempted in other British ex-colonies. The differences lie in the limitation of the power actually given away, the dispersal of the transferred power and the limited programmatic character of the process. Underlying the series of institutional reforms installed in the last several years there seems to be three manifest goals: (1) to create within the formal political system

a large number of political bodies interlocked horizontally and vertically, each of which can serve as a mini-centre of influence; (2) to promote the organisation of functional interests (particularly business and professional interests) as politically-relevant corporatist groups so that they can serve as the bulwark of the capitalist system; and (3) to strengthen the power and authority of the government in those areas deemed essential to effective British rule in the next twelve years.

The reforms related to the last goal are still only barely visible and take the forms of ad hoc measures or specific policies. The recently enacted Legislative Council (Power and Privileges) Ordinance, the controversial proposal to simplify the trial of complex commercial crime by doing away with the ordinary jury system and the plan to establish a tribunal to adjudicate objectionable publications, though serving other purposes, have the effect of bolstering governmental power. However, the reforms and the proposed reforms which carry the implication of enlarging the power and role of the government do not fare well with the people of Hong Kong who are apprehensive about the expansion of governmental involvement in economic and social affairs. The people are also afraid, not without reason, that the enlarged power of the government would ultimately be controlled by China and become instruments of political harassment. The mistrust of the Hong Kong government thus poses serious limits on the efforts to concentrate governmental power on specific areas. With time power concentration in several areas might be desperately needed to handle effectively social, economic and political difficulties, and eventually the support of China has perforce to be

enlisted to achieve it.

With regard to the first two goals, a series of steps have already been undertaken since the early 1980s. Again the Hong Kong government started at the local level, with the setting up in 1982 of 18 District Boards, charged with consultative functions and with a partially elected membership. The elective component was subsequently enlarged to two-thirds of the membership in 1985. At the same time, the chairmen of the Boards also became elective. At the semi-local level, there were the restructuring of the half elected Urban Council and the establishment of a largely similar Regional Council in the New Territories. Nonetheless, it is the White Paper, issued in 1984 and before the Sino-British Agreement was promulgated, which spells out the direction that political reform in the short run will take.⁴ The central element in the White Paper deals mainly with the composition of the Legislative Council, which is the central consultative body in the political system. Instead of a completely appointed membership, two new groups of elected members will be added, both with the same number of seats. Conversely, the appointive and official components will be gradually diminished. As a result, the overall size of the Council will be enlarged from 44 to 56 in 1985. The two new groups of Legislative Councillors will be elected by an electoral college made up of the members of the District Boards, the Urban Council and the newly-created Regional Council, and by a number of functional constituencies

⁴White Paper: *The Further Development of Representative Government in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, November 1984).

specifically recognised by the government. The electoral college will itself be partitioned into 12 voting blocs, each returning one member to the Legislative Council. The functional constituencies overtly grant overwhelming representational rights to the strategic elites. Direct popular election will be excluded as the means to fill the new seats in the legislature, nor will there be a substantial increase in its functions and power in respect to policy-making. Taken in all, the reforms undertaken are significant largely in a symbolic sense, and they fail to evoke great interest and involvement from the populace. The reaction of the strategic elites are somewhat negative, for despite their favourable treatment by the government, they are worried about the intrusion of the mass even as a small component in the political calculus and they are diffident of their ability to play a dominant role in a quasi-democratic game. To the tiny minority of pro-democratic activists, the reforms adopted are a letdown. However, they are too weak organisationally and in terms of their popularity to compel the government to grant more than meagre concessions. By 1987, when the reforms are due for review and further reform measures contemplated, China will become the crucial factor. By then the initiative of the Hong Kong government will be more or less depleted unless the British government determines to push ahead with her own set of reforms irrespective of the reaction of China. But this is highly unlikely as reforms without the blessing of China are doomed to failure because they will be perceived by all parties as only temporary aberrations. In any event, to resort to brinkmanship on the issue of political reform will not be in the short- and long-term interests of

Britain unless some unforeseen circumstances in British domestic politics supervene. As Britain and China share quite a number of similarities in their approach to reform in Hong Kong, such similarities being the result of the constraints operating on both sides, Britain might not necessarily be too reluctant to see China take over the initiative. At the very least, China will then have to share with Britain the unenviable task of withstanding the pressure for radical democratic reform coming from the vocal political activists, a task which China has dodged so far.

The Limited Options for China

The pledge of China to preserve the capitalist system of Hong Kong for half a millenium is a basically practical decision and is contingent upon a critical condition: that Hong Kong should be economically viable and useful to China's economic modernisation. Institutional changes of whatever kind can only be contemplated if they are compatible with the accomplishment of the preponderant economic mission of Hong Kong as a component part of China. As only Hong Kong's continual economic success under Chinese rule can vindicate China's discriminatory policy in favour of Hong Kong (as compared to the rest of China), Hong Kong's prosperity cannot be left simply to chance. This economic consideration, coupled with China's mistrust of the Hong Kong people, would naturally spur China to assume an active role in guiding or even controlling the future development of Hong Kong.

In the view of China, the existing depoliticised system of govern-

ment by bureaucrats has been the cornerstone of Hong Kong's economic progress. Therefore it is very natural for China to feel that any drastic and ill-conceived changes in the system could unleash unpredictable and unmanageable forces which would be to the detriment of stability and prosperity. Besides, the political system in Hong Kong is similar to that of China in many fundamental ways: executive-centredness, relative immunity from social pressure and top-down policy-making mode. There are admittedly fundamental differences too, such as the roles of an official ideology and of a hegemonic party in China, the vigilance of a free press and the independence of the judiciary in Hong Kong. Those features in the governmental machinery of Hong Kong that are similar to its counterpart in China must be reassuring to the Chinese leaders. As far as the judiciary is concerned, so much has already been stipulated in the Sino-British Agreement to provide for a decently independent judiciary that it can be taken as largely given, and hence is essentially exempt from formal changes in the future. The issue of the press may be disturbing, but once the governmental machinery is under control, it can be dealt with easily. Therefore, maintenance of the political status quo seems to be a safe option for China, the value of which may even be enhanced if the press in Hong Kong is willing to exercise self-restraint and if the courts in Hong Kong is content with its lack of the power of judicial review, i.e., passing judgment on issues of constitutionality of legislative and executive acts.

Accordingly, China does not share with Britain the sense of urgency in political reform. The institutional reforms instituted by the

Hong Kong government in the last several years have tended to release political forces which are looked upon with uneasiness by China. In order to pre-empt the British initiative in reform, prevent her from succumbing to the pressure for democratisation originating from Hong Kong or Britain and regulate the pace and content of political change in Hong Kong in conformity with Chinese interests and needs, a Basic Law Drafting Committee was swiftly convened by China in 1985 to design the future political system of Hong Kong. As the basic features of the future system will be made known in around 1987, in the year scheduled by the Hong Kong government to review the reforms instituted, China as the ultimate authority on the political fate of Hong Kong will then have the predominant influence in structuring the reform programme.

Despite the political attractiveness of the existing political system, implementing the solemn pledge of 'political autonomy' and 'Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong' still calls for some measures of political change. This is related to the need to give the strategic elites (especially the businessmen and professionals) some assurance that they will have a stake in the system, the need to enable some qualified and supportive Hong Kong people to fill the spaces left behind by the colonial authority, the need to demonstrate to the outside world (particularly Taiwan) that the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong is truly autonomous, the need to show that termination of colonial rule will bring about a more 'democratic' government and the need to provide the future Hong Kong government some powers to withstand unauthorised interference coming possibly from various governmental organs of China (particularly those

at the local and provincial levels). But these needs do not necessarily call for fundamental changes in the power structure within Hong Kong via the process of 'democratisation,' especially in view of the fact that the economic elites in Hong Kong are deadly opposed to it.

In addition to many of the dilemmas in regard to political reform which are at present tormenting the Hong Kong government, there are some dilemmas peculiar to China herself, stemming from the very nature of her Hong Kong policy. The most important consideration here is that Hong Kong's capitalist status quo is not to be preserved forever. China has promised 'no change' for only fifty years, which means that ultimately Hong Kong is to be altered in such a way that it can be integrated with socialist China, even though the direction such an alteration will take is far from clear. Within the fifty years of status quo promised, it is not inconceivable that domestic political changes in China might necessitate some corresponding changes, though not necessarily fundamental ones, in Hong Kong, which will no longer be immune from political fluctuations in China as in the past. The intrinsic transitoriness of the status quo hence would caution against political reforms which would enable the people of Hong Kong to resist 'legitimately' overtures to change from China in a popularly organised form.

Ironically, even granted the sincerity of China in refraining from intervening arbitrarily and blatantly in Hong Kong's affairs, any drastic changes in Hong Kong's political system in the direction of democratisation are still hardly acceptable. Democratisation, accompanied by group activism, mass volatility and the emergence of party politics, would

make political control by China much more difficult, albeit not impossible. What is worse is that under such circumstances political control cannot avoid assuming a visible and peremptory form, and in the end China might willy-nilly become a full and dominant actor in Hong Kong's political scene. Such a scenario is detrimental to stability and prosperity.

To the extent that China is more concerned with stability than with innovation, increasing group activism and the emergence of party politics mean additional complexity and uncertainty for the political future of Hong Kong. Undoubtedly it is easier for China to exercise control in a situation where political forces are atomised than in another where political forces are more organised and can claim some degree of popular legitimacy. Traditionally, communist states are hostile to political pluralism. With self-confidence increased and under the imperative of improving economic efficiency, tolerance of disagreements and interest group activities has increased in most of the communist states. In most cases, however, groups are still denied any legitimate autonomy and the emergence of competitive parties is suppressed. This general practice does not have any immediate relevance to Hong Kong, since China has already made known that socialist system and practices will not be applicable to Hong Kong. Nevertheless, China cannot but be concerned with the development of group activism and party politics lest these forces may become a challenge to her interests and policies. If group activism and party politics cannot be totally eradicated, China faces the options between influencing the power struggle through third parties or direct participation herself. As direct participation is

'disruptive' to stability and prosperity in Hong Kong, acting through third parties seems to be the better option. China could skillfully install a front organisation in her service. Moreover, China would identify, court or nurture certain fraternity groups for the new game of political participation. The ascendance of Chinese power in Hong Kong can with time produce the magnetic bandwagon effects to facilitate the formation of the pro-China united front. Still, in order for China to exert control over Hong Kong in an indirect, subtle, more or less removed manner, and thus to avoid direct and blatant intervention in Hong Kong's affairs, she would have to opt for the existing political system, probably with minor changes.

The option of maintaining the present pattern of government intact has however become increasingly difficult to pursue. Since the Sino-British negotiation, Hong Kong has been politicised to an unprecedented degree. A small number of political activists and groups are vociferous in demanding democratic reform, and their lack of real power is offset by their skillfully exploiting the free-wheeling and competitive mass media in Hong Kong to generate public opinion pressure. Both the development of representative government and the task of drafting the Basic Law have invited the public to become more attentive and more involved in political affairs. However reluctantly and unpreparedly, China has to deal with the rising political expectation.

Despite the political weakness of the pro-democratic forces, it is not at all easy for China to contain their influence. One of the major troubles is that China has perforce to pay homage to the principle of

representative or democratic government. Another thing is that while China's influence in Hong Kong is rising, by virtue of the fact that she is not yet the ruling power her capacity for reward and punishment is limited. In addition, the presence of the Hong Kong government complicates the situation by providing a shell of legal protection to the activists. Political maneuverings directed against them would thus be generally interpreted as intervention in Hong Kong's affairs by China. In any event, any high-handed tactic against the pro-democratic elements carries the obnoxious likelihood of creating fear among the people of Hong Kong who, while not sharing the ideals and goals of the activists, would be afraid of overt exercise of the overwhelming Chinese power.

But that of course does not mean that China is miserably helpless in face of the political aspirations of the vocal minority of the Hong Kong people. Time is definitely on the side of China as the future ruler. In the meantime, through patient and meticulous political work, buttressed by selective dispensation of rewards and threats of future punitive sanctions, those democratic activists with an opportunistic disposition can be placated or co-opted.⁵ By mobilising and organising the strong

⁵ As a matter of fact, while group activism has become exciting, it is by no means threatening to China. Almost all democratic activists have professed allegiance to the objectives of prosperity and stability. None of the more prominent of them has posed as belligerent and radical opponent to the Chinese cause. All want to participate but none dares to 'lead.' Most likely, they would be happy with a place under the sun, content with the role of invited consultants or spokesmen for sectoral interests. They would not challenge China's prerogative of aggregating various interests and speaking for the whole of Hong Kong. As such they will not differ substantially from groups in communist countries and can be tolerated.

anti-democratic forces in Hong Kong to take the offensive, the appeal of the democratic activists can be diluted or blunted. To deal with the few die-hard democratic activists, the tactic will be to divide and isolate them, or frighten them into silence. Given the political apathy of the masses, the staunch support of the economic and social elites and the increasing self-censorship of the mass media, the present pressure for large-scale democratic reform can gradually be dissipated. In the next couple of years, the drafting of the Basic Law and the public consultations it entails will enable China to play a preeminent role in molding public opinion in Hong Kong. By carefully controlling the agenda for discussion, the kind of people allowed to participate in the drafting process, the parameters of arguments, the availability and distribution of key informations, etc., China will most probably succeed in cultivating political attitudes and ideas close to her heart.

The Limits to Political Organisation in Hong Kong

In view of the overwhelming power at the disposal of the British and Chinese governments, it requires no stretch of imagination to aver that the role of the Hong Kong people in designing their future political system is small. Even so, some political activists are undaunted and since the onset of the Sino-British negotiation a bewildering number of political and quasi-political groups have appeared, and the number is still increasing. While these groups differ in orientation and tactics, what is striking however are their basic similarities. Most of them are disposed to reform Hong Kong socially, economically and politically, and

all of them are small, loosely organised and made up mainly of cadres. There are not much of an established hierarchy of leadership, a binding platform and organisational discipline. The little influence they can exercise in the political scene can be explained primarily by the coverage given them by the mass media and the niche in the system made available to them by the political reforms introduced over the past few years. As of now, the thin layer of pro-democratic political leadership is weak and fragmented, and divided by personal grudges and jealousies. Through coalitions and amalgamations based on mutual interests and goals, some larger political groups might emerge. But it is highly unlikely that they would develop into full-scale political parties, with strong mass bases and the full array of affiliated functional organisations, and act as bona fide representatives of the Hong Kong people vis-à-vis Britain and China. In point of fact, these leaders constitute but a small proportion of the Hong Kong leaders who are typically moderate, conservative, pliable, authoritarian, ineffective and amorphous.

The very nature of the society of Hong Kong, the political imperative of stability and prosperity, and the preponderant role of Britain and China acting in concert to determine the political system of Hong Kong would pose several insuperable obstacles to the expansion, organisational consolidation and propagation of appeal of the political groups. And these are in addition to the fatal one of the exclusion of military power from party control, which renders the political parties forever vulnerable to physical suppression from above.

First of all, the limited, dispersed and fragmented power that is

made available by the political reforms of the Hong Kong government makes it a gargantuan task for any group to consolidate political power. It must be a Sisyhean task to aggregate horizontally and vertically the divergent interests of a large number of political bodies and functional groups. Under some favourable circumstances where common interests can be found, some forms of loose coalition among the elites can be forged, but such a coalition is likely to be temporary. Moreover, the same coalition of actors might not necessarily repeat itself the next time owing to a different conglomeration of interests.

Secondly, the political apathy and mistrust of the mass and the hostility to mass and agitational politics of the strategic elites operate jointly to 'compress' the space of action of the aspiring politicians. Under such conditions, political groups with a populist, welfarist or redistributionist orientation will find it difficult to manoeuvre. Besides, the instrumental and pragmatic political culture of the people would propel them to demand immediate and concrete benefits from the leaders as the quid pro quo for political support. Without the willing cooperation of the strategic elites, these political groups will be unable to meet the demands of their potential grassroots constituents and will then be discredited in their eyes. On the other hand, to resort to something akin to 'class war' is practically inconceivable in the present context.

Nevertheless, since the politically apathetic masses are at the same time restless, cynical, frustrated, alienated, disenchanting and apprehensive, traits that can easily be traced to their economic and political powerlessness and the sense of uncertainty for the future,

they are susceptible of mobilisation into short-term, small-scale, anomic collective actions in response to sudden political and economic crises or immediate threats to concrete interests. But such sporadic actions are no solid basis for building stable 'proletarian' parties. What is more, the natural ally or foundation of populist and radical political parties--the trade unions--has already been pre-empted for other purposes. Unions under the aegis of China, which make up the bulk of blue-collar unions, are not likely to act against her interests in Hong Kong. Unions formed by public sector employees, which have multiplied in number since the 1970s and constitute an important part of the trade-union movement in Hong Kong, are relatively conservative and basically economically predisposed. Hence they are unlikely to participate in drastic actions for radical political purposes. In any event, trade unions in Hong Kong are generally weak and in the short- and medium-run the probability of a significant enlargement of their power and role is low. In lieu of trade unions, populist political groups might have to resort to the organisation and mobilisation of community and residential groupings as well as issue-oriented groups. However, they will never provide a stable basis for sustained and broad-scaled political involvement and participation.

Political groups set out to advance and safeguard capitalist interests are quite few primarily because the status quo is already favourable to them. And as both Britain and China have vowed to protect capitalism, the need for active political involvement by these interests is much reduced. Furthermore, both Britain and China do

not seem to be enthusiastic about the formation of political parties. This reservation about party politics on the part of the two ruling powers will not go unheeded in the elite circles. Even if the established interests are to organise themselves politically, they can hardly form a popularly based conservative party like that found in Japan, Ivory Coast, India or other developing countries for want of a large, deferential, loyal and stable rural base. In the urban society of Hong Kong, a conservative party with a decent level of popular support is only possible if the bourgeoisie are willing to woo the electorate by channelling money and services downward to the masses through complex patron-client networks, which in turn have to be built from scratch and with strenuous efforts. But this the strategic elites in Hong Kong are extremely loath to do. Under these circumstances, the best tactic for a 'bourgeois' party can only be the obstructionist one.

Groups with a 'cross-class' or 'above-class' orientation that aim at reconciling class interests might fare a little bit better in terms of mass appeal since they, as catchall 'parties,' tend to promise something at least to everyone and such an orientation fits into the people's penchant for consensus and harmony. However, the recruitment of members espousing divergent and conflicting interests into the same political body will eventually import social conflicts into the group and undermine its solidarity and discipline. 'Cross-class' political groups might be a more effective vote-getting device, at least in the short-run, but they are likely to be divided internally and can hardly function as a unified and cohesive political force pursuing innovative policies threatening

the interests of a particular class. Moreover, such a group will have to face the perennial possibility of eventual disintegration. This possibility is increased in Hong Kong in view of the intransigency and hostility of the bourgeoisie.

Thirdly, to anticipate future institutional development, the political weakness of the future legislature and its institutional separation from the executive will mean that the bureaucracy, already deeply entrenched in the existing political system, will continue to be the main source of public policies and resources. Potential supporters and followers of political parties will be driven to the bureaucracy for assistance, demand-making, guidance and possibly political spoils, and the potential follower base of the party will hence be depleted. The institutional separateness of the bureaucracy and the anti-political bureaucratic culture also deprive the budding political parties an invaluable source of political leadership. In countries such as France, Germany and Japan, political leadership is commonly provided by ex-bureaucrats. Hong Kong's civil servants, on the contrary, are prohibited from running for electoral office. Upon retirement, bureaucratic norms still pose a hurdle to seeking a political career. Besides, there are always the more attractive and lucrative offers from the business sector for the ex-higher-civil-servants.

Fourthly, with stability and prosperity recognised by all as supreme virtues there simply is no burning ideological issue to galvanize support and build organisation on. Anti-communism is out of the question, so is anti-colonialism. The articulation of capitalist tenets

into a set of political virtues are unlikely since capitalism itself has a low potential for ideologisation and moralisation, and it is difficult to envisage a situation where capitalism is explicitly and stridently extolled as a belief system at the side of a socialist superpower holding in its hand Hong Kong's sovereignty. The fabrication of an ideological appeal based on class division might be possible, but will gain credulous followers only in times of severe economic difficulties. On top of all this, the largely pragmatic inclination of the people will drive them away from ideologues. In fact, the popular beliefs of the Hong Kong people are too pasty, pragmatic, instrumental, variegated and opportunistic to serve as a guide to political thought and action.⁶

⁶ Even so, the prevalent uncertainties in Hong Kong and the ambiguities in the 'one country, two systems' formula might provide a potentially favourable milieu to articulate an ideological appeal based on the issue of the identity (particularly the political identity) of the Hong Kong Chinese as a citizen of an Special Administrative Region of China. Though the issue of identity is as yet not saliently perceived, a political group or a political leader can definitely score some points among the people if a meaningful, positive and consistent identity can be developed to enable them to look into the future with certainty and hope, and ideally also a sense of purpose. It will be an identity which will imaginatively integrate the elements of cosmopolitanism, westernism, anti-colonialism, pragmatism, anti-communism, nationalism, patriotism, economism, familism, etc. The identity must be able to facilitate cooperative and amicable relationship between Hong Kong and China. It will be an identity which will not smack of either intransigent, flamboyant localism or blind, fanatic patriotism. It has to delineate the role and functions that the Hong Kong Chinese are to play in the future political context as a component part of the larger Chinese society. In other words, the new identity has to provide certainty amid uncertainties and to incorporate past and current events into a meaningful and acceptable historical context. To develop such an identity, strong elements of realism has to be introduced into a feat of ideal-building. This would inevitably

Fifthly, it is difficult to erase the semi-dependent image of political leaders in Hong Kong, which would lower their status in the eyes of the people. This semi-dependency is grounded in the two structural features of the political system: (1) the constitutionally inferior status of Hong Kong as a colony and then as a Special Administrative Region, the most important implication of which being that all political leaders and groups are ultimately vulnerable to punitive sanction by the central government; and (2) the limited role of popular election in distributing political power. The superior authority held by the British government and in the future by the Chinese government over Hong Kong makes it imperative that the support and endorsement of these superior authorities have to be procured prior to any exercise of effective leadership. The institution of popular election would certainly prompt aspiring leaders to seek support from the electorate,

6 (cont'd)

reduce the emotional appeal of the new identity. Perhaps the most serious obstacle to the articulation of such an identity lies in its relational character, viz., in the fact that the identity is purported to define the position of the Hong Kong Chinese in relation to China. As China is changing fast in a direction no one can foresee with confidence, she thus does not provide the anchorage on which to build a stable identity. Consequently, identity-builders are helplessly dependent on something beyond their control, even beyond their comprehension. Even if China were to remain unchanged, the huge cultural, institutional and economic gap between China and Hong Kong would render such an identity-building effort a Herculean, if not Sisyphean, one. That may explain why amid all the cries for democracy, no political activist has yet taken upon himself this arduous, but potentially more fruitful, task of launching identity appeals.

but at the same time the calculative, instrumental, mistrustful and dissimulative voters would measure the effectiveness and probably credibility of leaders by their ability to obtain public resources from the public sector and deliver them directly to select individuals and groups. Under these circumstances, there will be the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon that popular recognition of leadership status is contingent upon its recognition and endorsement by higher authorities. This semi-dependent nature of political leadership will be further strengthened by the lack of mass support for the leaders, which makes the 'bargaining' power of the leaders even more negligible vis-à-vis higher authorities. The political weakness of semi-dependent leaders hence makes party-building a most difficult job.

Lastly, the limited role of the Hong Kong government in social and economic affairs and the still admirable performance of the economy serve to dampen interests in a potentially risky political career among those qualified. When politics is not the gateway to economic and social goods, and when these can be obtained in a much less painful and dangerous way, the ability of the political groups to recruit cadres and followers will be diminished.

In view of the insuperable obstacles to the formation of powerful political groups or parties in Hong Kong, the pattern of political organisation and leadership behaviour in the run-up to 1997 and somewhere beyond can be readily envisaged, and inklings of it are already in sight.

(1) There will not be a sharp break between the old and new leaders. A clear-cut process of leadership displacement will not occur.

Instead, the future leadership will be composed of both types of leaders. Because of their semi-dependent nature, the rapid changes in the political scene in the future will inexorably eliminate many of the present leaders as a result of their depleted usefulness. The tenure of most leaders will be relatively short and tenuous, and there will be a rapid succession of leaders.

(2) Most leaders will be amateur rather than career politicians. Since a political career in Hong Kong is potentially risky and basically uncertain, only a few leaders will be willing to give up their original occupations and devote full-time to politics. In a society where an autonomous political sphere has yet to be established to confer in its own right status and prestige on political leaders, economic, social and cultural leaders can without too much difficulty turn themselves into amateur political leaders by bringing into politics their proven achievements in other fields. In the limited democratic system that will eventually be created, the likelihood is great that many of the political and semi-political posts will fall into the hands of amateur politicians. The shortage of career politicians, on the other hand, will unavoidably impede the development of powerful political organisations and institutions in Hong Kong.

(3) Invidious and cut-throat competition among aspiring leaders will be the name of the game. As a member of an amorphous group of political leaders without strong mass bases, he must distinguish himself as an individual from other leaders, either in the mass media or within the elite circle, if he is to get a response or receive recognition from

the people or the higher authorities. The premium is on individual achievements, personal traits or sheer media publicity. With respect to the higher authorities, he might even feel compelled to behave servilely and sycophantically in order to stimulate their attention or insinuate himself into their favour.

(4) There will be a rash and impatient character to the behaviour of leaders in the scramble for political offices. This reflects basically the sudden availability of channels of political mobility (which are however far from institutionalised), a lack of established hierarchy among them, a contempt for past experience and seniority, a desperate need to 'establish' oneself fast, a lack of organisational restraint, paucity of political maturity, a retainer mentality and an emphasis on the status, prestige, and materialistic aspects of the electoral or appointive posts rather than their substantive (job-related) demands and obligations.

(5) As a result of the compulsion among leaders to grab political posts, be they elective or appointive, the mundane and hence lacklustre duties of organisational maintenance and development are neglected. Political groups and parties are not uncommonly treated as expedient stepping-stones to political office, and they can be dispensed with subsequently. Multiple membership in several political groups is a means to maximise one's political opportunities. Loyalty to a particular group is contingent upon its instrumental value, defection from it is inevitable if that value is exhausted. In order to expand a political group, instead of following the more difficult but proper route of mass mobilisation and organisation, the more convenient and expedient way of incorporating

or forming coalitions with existing social, economic and political groups is normally followed. The coalitional character of such political groups or parties, encumbered with a multitude of subgroup loyalties, is not likely to be conducive to group solidarity. We can then expect to see fluid alliances among groups, leaders and factions based on short-term benefits, common operational styles, personality compatibilities, political orientation, expediency, horse-trading and a variety of offensive and defensive purposes.

(6) There will be a limited and fragile leadership hierarchy, with the top leaders exercising more prestige and influence rather than real power. The power of patronage of the higher leaders is circumscribed, hence any patron-client network is liable to instability. The Hong Kong government and increasingly the Chinese government can play a substantial role in making and un-making these fragile 'patron-client' networks by giving or withdrawing support and recognition from the 'patrons.'

(7) There will be a proliferation of political groups and parties, but none of them can claim much public support. The cadre character of these groups and parties will facilitate their fission and fusion. Under some conditions where common interests are evident, a temporary, loose alliance on a broad scale might result. Some groups might even coalesce to form a large and seemingly formidable political party, but still it will be plagued by internal factionalism. By and large, political groups and parties function largely as electoral organisations and parliamentary factions rather than ruling or policy-making mechanisms.

In short, elite participation in politics in a context of de-ideologisation

and mass apathy is bound to be fragmented and fluid. Such conditions are naturally conducive to manipulation by the Hong Kong and the Chinese governments.

Limits of Institutional Changes

It is in the national interests of Britain and China to confine institutional changes in the political system of Hong Kong to small-scale, incremental alterations and to leave the status quo more or less unscathed. At the same time, most of the established groups and leaders in Hong Kong evince an aversion to drastic changes which would threaten their interests. The vocal minority of democratic activists and groups are not in a position, organisationally and politically, to force the two governments to grant more than minimal concessions. Consequently, we expect alterations along two axes: refining the existing institutional structure and streamlining it by removing the 'incongruities' produced by past haphazard institutional development. The overall direction of reform is to establish an authoritarian, executive-centred political system enjoying a fair amount of popular legitimacy based primarily on system performance and allowing of a decent level of political participation. In normal circumstances this kind of political system is perpetually in a condition of unstable equilibrium, because it will either revert back to a monocratic system or succumb to public demand for democracy. However, under the controlling hand of China, it is not impossible that an unstable equilibrium will be permanently maintained.

At the 'national' level, there will be an executive-centred system

with a powerful meritocratic bureaucracy playing an influential role. Heading the executive will be the chief executive appointed by China after selection by election or through consultations held locally. As the chief executive is the medium through which China is to ultimately control Hong Kong, it is more likely that the politically safer method of consultation will be adopted for a substantial period of time after 1997. In the process of consultation, it is likely that the legislature is only one among the many political and functional groups to be consulted in order not to create the impression that the chief executive depends on the legislature for his office or serves at its pleasure. The independence of the executive also means that the chief executive and the senior government officials appointed by him cannot be removed by the legislature through impeachment or a vote of no confidence. On the contrary, in order to symbolise Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong and to assert ultimate Chinese interests, we expect the chief executive to be armed with these constitutional powers: reserved veto power to override the decisions of the legislature, declaration of a state of emergency, deployment of the Chinese army stationed in Hong Kong with the approval of China, and prorogation and dissolution of the legislature in case of exigency. Even if a system of election is eventually introduced to select the chief executive, the system is likely to be indirect, circumscribed, infused with the elements of consultation and qualified by a restrictive process of candidate nomination.

The appointive bureaucracy will be modified in two major ways. A watered-down ministerial system will be superimposed on top of the

career bureaucrats. Unlike the cabinet government of the Westminster type, ministers will be chosen individually by the chief executive, probably after a series of consultations. They will come from the legislators, the professionals and higher bureaucrats. They serve at the pleasure of the chief executive and are thus replaceable. The chief executive is not likely to be under constitutional stipulation to appoint only elected legislators as ministers. Only if this is true can the chief executive and the executive system be constitutionally independent of the legislature.

Another way whereby the bureaucracy will be modified is the increased use of lateral entry as a channel of bureaucratic recruitment. In a system with limited democracy, the absorption of outside political talent into the bureaucracy is highly desirable as a means to reduce political discontent and to rejuvenate a bureaucracy somewhat demoralized by political changes. At any rate, the departure of a number of higher civil servants resulting from fear of communist reprisal might compel the bureaucracy to invigorate itself through the inclusion of outsiders.

The future legislature will be largely elected, though it is quite probable that the appointment system will linger on if for no other reason than to reserve it as a means to domesticate a rebellious legislature if necessary. Elections to legislative seats will be a combination of direct, indirect and functional-group elections so as to prevent the legislature from being at the mercy of the caprices of the electorate. We do not foresee a situation where direct election will be the principal electoral mode (for more than half of the electoral seats). Even if

employed, it is more probable that direct elections will be on a district basis. At-large elections on a Hong Kong-wide basis are not likely, for they will produce legislators brandishing a popular mandate who can hardly be 'fitted' into an authoritarian, executive-centred and political system.

Compared with the existing legislature, the future one however will be much more influential, and hence its future political role will be more significant and cannot be arbitrarily shoved aside by the chief executive. We would expect the future legislature to be able to censure and interpellate officials, to investigate into matters of public concern, to be consulted on the appointment of senior officials and the chief executive, to approve and revise the government budget, and to oversee the bureaucracy. In addition, the legislature will perform the significant functions of political representation, generating support for the government, political education, interest articulation, redress of grievances, leadership training and recruitment, brokerage between officials and their clients and in particular constituency work. Though these activities are less important than law-making and policy formulation, they nevertheless are highly relevant to the consensus-formation needs of a society facing the vicissitudes accompanying sovereignty transfer. Even with respect to policy making, the role of the future legislature can be enhanced if it can develop an elaborate system of specialised committees to upgrade its information and research capabilities. To what extent the legislature can perform its functions adequately depends on whether a stable and broad-scale alignment of forces within the

legislature can be established spontaneously and the availability of a free press. In the last analysis, a legislature devoid of much real power can aspire mainly to play the role of public-opinion-maker, applying pressure on the executive. It is thus crucial that it can act more or less in unity and that it be capable of galvanizing the support of the mass media.

At the local level, the major reforms will likely be geared to streamlining and removal of 'incongruities.' This is because local political reforms in the past were unprogrammatically and were basically improvisations for various political purposes. The result is a labyrinthine accumulation of structures and organisations with an obscure division of functions and jurisdictions which are generative of conflicts between local and central organs as well as turf wars among local organs. The large number (19) of district boards are not given any executive powers but are paradoxically allowed to address themselves to whatever issues that are of public concern or that carry the potential of drawing public attention to themselves and their members. This unavoidably makes for irresponsibilities, pomposity, self-righteousness and demagoguery, leaving local matters sometimes unattended to. By acting as electoral colleges for sending deputies to the legislature, district boards will also ineluctably be drawn into the realm of 'national' issues, thus injecting a large number of vociferous but cacophonous voices, imbued with parochial concerns, into the process of policy formation. The result will be confusion, delay, frustration and gross inefficiency. Contrariwise, the Urban Council and

the Regional Council are given real power over a narrow jurisdiction of public hygiene, urban services, culture and recreation and thus constitute a separate system of administration of their own, whose coordination with the administrative and planning activities of the government as a whole is at best ambiguous. This is an odd administrative arrangement, possibly also a wasteful one, in a compact society. In order to cut the local political organs down to size, but at the same time to enable them to play a meaningful administrative role and to stimulate local political participation, we expect several lines of development: (1) a reduction of the number of district boards with an eye on the efficient delivery of services; (2) all the district boards be made fully elective; (3) abolition of the Urban and Regional Councils and the transfer of their power and functions to the consolidated district boards; and (4) the transfer of additional administrative duties of strictly local concern to the district boards; and (4) confining their opinion-making role to the local level. After reorganisation, there will be a quasi-two-tiered government, for the district boards might not necessarily have a bureaucracy of their own or an independent power to raise revenue. The central government will no doubt be still excessively powerful, but nevertheless many of the administrative and service functions of the government which are of immediate relevance to the general public will be delegated downward and within meaningful control by the people, and this will be useful in relieving the political and administrative overload of the central government.

Needless to say, what will transpire in the coming years may not

necessarily be as what is predicted. In our opinion, the scenarios as depicted above should be considered mainly as the possible limits of institutional change in Hong Kong. We therefore would not be surprised if reality actually falls short of our prediction. If the democratic activists have a role to play and an influence to exercise in the future political development of Hong Kong, it is our opinion that they are the embodiment of the dynamic forces that will push political reforms to their realistic limits.

中英協議簽署後之香港

(中文摘要)

劉兆佳、關信基著

一九八四年底中英協議簽署後，香港開始了政治的過渡。今後的主要課題就是怎樣在繁榮與安定的要求下，進行必要的政制改革。本文旨在探討改革的可能方向和限制。

政制改革將會遭遇些甚麼困難呢？首先、為使一九九七年時主權移交能順利進行，過渡期間的政制改革自有其必要。但是為了防止改革措施可能引起或加深對未來政制的恐懼，改革方案的選擇便受到限制，而保守性的選舉會較佔上風。

其次，任何改革方案如果要長久有效都有賴中英雙方的同意，但中英雙方都會由於利益的分歧和彼此的猜忌而極力爭取主動。以圖佔先一步為改革奠定長遠的基礎。這樣一來，許多選擇可能會在倉卒間消滅。

再者，為避免產生分裂，政治改革必須同時滿足既得利益者的要求和新興勢力的願望。這當然也是一個不易解決的矛盾。

多年來的官僚統治使香港無從產生有效的政治領袖，這不但不利於當前的改革措施，也對未來治權移交本地人的理想構成挑戰。

最後，一般人對中英政府缺乏信心也是政制改革的一大困難，尤其是當改革被人看成是一種加強政府權力而削弱人民自由的措施時，反改革的心態和行為更是難以控制。

對英國而言，政制改革有那些可能的方向呢？非殖民地化顯然是勢在必行的。問題在於是否同時推行民主化。由於非殖民地化的最後目的不是獨立、民主化就不是英國的必然目標了。

在過渡期間，英國最關心的是要維持有效的統治。這政策目標對民主化有正反兩面的影响。因此任何改革措施都會是試探性，隨情勢而進退的。近年來的改革跡象是第一、製造彼此牽連的政治結構，培養小型的權力中心；第二、鼓勵功能利益組織化及政治化，以鞏固資本主義的陣地；第三、加強有助統治的部門權力。

對中國而言，香港之所以能享有與中國其他地方不同的待遇，無非是為了統一（包括台灣）大業和四個現代化。香港模式的成敗實在關係重大。因而中國當權者也不會掉以輕心一味信賴英國人或香港人。香港的官僚式、非政治化的政制既然是香港過去經濟成就的支柱之一，而這個體制也與中共的專政政體有雷同之處（就以行政掛帥，社會無從監督，和自上而下的決策流程而言）。因此，保留香港現行政制的特徵可能會被視為安全的戰略。

誠然，「港人治港」的承諾和其他的要求都促使中國不得不贊成改革。但是改革的目的看來不是為了民主。理由是，一來中國需要讓「恐懼民主」的「投資

者放心」，二來民主帶來的政治勢力多元化，羣眾及選民的游離，和政黨政治的錯縱複雜都不利於中國遙控香港的局勢。如果民主改革迫使中國比較積極的就近控制此地政局則會引起反感或反動，不利於繁榮與安定。

中國對香港政制改革的保守傾向面臨着香港空前政治化的挑戰，而民主要求又是不得不尊重的東西。所以，中國必然會用盡手段進行輿論及組織工作，並透過基本法的諮詢過程來培養接近其主張的態度和思想。

在香港政制改革過程中，中英政府無疑地處於主導的地位，而香港人的角色是瞠乎其後的。香港傳統上缺乏政治領袖和政治組織，新興的力量基礎脆弱，都要面對富有政治鬥爭經驗的中英政府，又要接受繁榮與安定的規範，而且尚未得到有政治恐懼症的精英或政治冷感症的羣眾支持。因此亦難以強化組織（進而於政黨政治的發展），亦難以突出政綱。（此則不利於政治思潮的滋長）。由是觀之，香港的政治人及政治組織在政制改革中只會起個別性而非結構性的作用。

以上從各主要角色觀察其對政制改革的可能影响，而歸結到一個保守改革的總趨勢。我們可以預見一些現存制度的改善，過去政制發展中所產生的矛盾現象的修正，而最後的體制還是一個以行政為中心，以效率博取民心 and 容忍一定程度政治參與的權威主義模式。