

The Big Showdown

Patten gets his democratic reforms, prompting threats from China to “terminate” the political system

By James Walsh

HEADLINES SIGNALLED A RED ALERT. Accusations of betrayal flew. The stock market took a sharp dip, and diplomatic rhetoric nearly boiled over. About the only thing missing was any sign of heightened concern in houses, shops and streets. What did Hong Kong’s people know that the politicians did not? That Governor Chris Patten’s first success last week in democratizing politics was neither their salvation by Britain nor their doom at the hands of China. Certainly it provoked vows from Beijing to uproot Hong Kong’s government wholesale in mid-1997. But if Britain had “slammed the door” on cooperation, as Beijing officials angrily insisted, the bulk of Hong Kong sensed that China’s stand would not be the last word either.

Almost anywhere else, the electoral reform would hardly be the stuff to raise hairs. They call for broadening the base of representative government in ways that most of the world would consider quite cautious. Approved by the colony’s Legislative Council late last week after a stormy debate, the first phase merely lowers the voting age from 21 to 18 and prescribes direct elections to all seats on district boards-neighborhood councils that mostly review public-works improvements. Nonetheless, China knows that Patten’s next reforms, due to be introduced on March 9---expanding electoral bases for the legislature itself---stand to make government more accountable to the public than the mainland would like.

China accused Britain of a heinous breach of faith and warned that Hong Kong’s estimated \$20.3 billion new airport project might suffer as a consequence. Authorities in Guanzhou, 140 km northwest, made it clear that British contractor would not be considered for the city’s new subway system. As for politics, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Shen Goufang said Hong Kong’s legislature “will definitely be terminated” when China resumes sovereignty on July 1, 1997.

In that sense, Patten’s local critics charged that he had engineered a Pyrrhic victory. Patten emphasized that the door remained open to continued dialogue with Beijing. Said legislator Tam Yiu Chung: “Although the door may not have been shut, the negotiating table has been overturned and all the chairs around the table removed”. The fault for that, Patten shot back, only history will decide.

London seemed determined last week to help write that history, releasing a white paper with a 36-page summary of a decade of Sino-British negotiations, including last year’s talks on the colony’s future. Patten said China’s official People’s Daily had broken confidentially first by running a Jan. 7 mainland synopsis of the bargain.