

## MASTER'S THESIS

# We had no urge to do away an ex-colony: the changing views of the British government over Hong Kong's future, 1967-1979

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## Abstract

This thesis discusses the British government's decision to maintain colonial rule in Hong Kong beyond 1997 between 1967 and 1979. After the 1967 riots, the Labour and Conservative governments started considering the negotiation of Hong Kong's future in the 1980s. Their views on Hong Kong's future evolved from the Labour's uncertainty, to Conservative's optimism, and finally to Labour's attempts to erase the 1997 deadline and to retain Hong Kong as a colony permanently. Factors taken into their considerations included Cold War, decolonisation, China's policies on Hong Kong, and Britain-Hong Kong relations. Both Labour and Conservative insisted on preserving British sovereignty over disputed colonies such as Hong Kong, the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar regardless of the worldwide decolonisation. Besides, their eagerness to contain Communism and maintain Britain's international status, and Hong Kong's strategic and psychological value in Cold War outweighed the deficiencies of Britain-Hong Kong relations and China's unpredictable policies. Therefore, Labour and Conservative governments intended to run Hong Kong as a colony perpetually rather than decolonise it as did in other colonies.

To achieve this goal, the British government adopted a reform-oriented colonialism. It empowered the Hong Kong government to deliver social reforms to improve the colony's living standard, which were used to prepare a colony's decolonisation. After the 1967 riots, although Governor David Trench implemented this colonial idea regarding Hong Kong's future, he remained as a housekeeper and only looked for the short term. Succeeding Trench in 1971, Murray MacLehose established a responsive colonial administration and delivered the Conservative's long-term strategy—to widen the living standard between Hong Kong and China—to deter China from recovering the territory. Notable reforms were on government-people relations, housing, education, social welfare and medical and health services. By 1974, the Labour government followed and modified this strategy to justify British colonial rule in Hong Kong domestically and internationally. In this process, Hong Kong was able to design its social reforms, to counter Britain's interests and to reshape its relations with Britain into a partnership. Yet Britain delegated Hong Kong to do so only to remain ultimate control rather than decolonised it. In other words, delegation of power and improvement of living standard were Britain's tools to retain its colonial rule in Hong Kong perpetually. Colonialism and decolonisation were thus interrelated.

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