

Last word gives a first taste of future realities

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Last word gives a first taste of future realities

THE people have witnessed something historic and poignant in Governor Patten's 1995 policy address.

Historically, it was the last real annual policy address of the last colonial Governor to the last colonial Legislative Council in the last significant colony of the soon-to-expire British empire.

While Mr Patten will give one more policy speech in October 1996, the latest one is truly, as he has said, "the last of its kind that I will make".

He meant that in his final speech to Legco he would be summing up the British legacy and passing on wisdom, and possibly admonitions, to his Special Administrative Region (SAR) successor.

But he may be more right than he knows. This speech may be the last of its kind that

any executive officer of Hong Kong makes.

Consider: during the transition, the Governor of the day spoke of weighty affairs of international importance as well as the more humdrum matters of how many new hospital beds and secondary school slots would be added in the forthcoming year.

The Governor of the day often felt pressed to comment on Hong Kong's relations with China, its role in the world as an international city, a centre of commerce, a window to the world for China, a role model of development that others should emulate.

The Governor often emphasised the significant role of Hong Kong on the world stage, the importance that its development—economic and

political—played in the further development of China. Global concerns like democracy and human rights ran throughout the speeches.

Hong Kong, a city of barely 1,036 square kilometres and around six million people, because of its circumstances became a centre of global fascination.

Everyone wants to know what is going to happen. Will it work after the handover or will all fall apart spectacularly?

The mundane realities of governance in a territory of this size and population have been overshadowed by the more dramatic circumstances of our historical situation.

We have forgotten that Hong Kong was once a colonial backwater. The post of

COMMENT

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governor here was not the high-profile, high-pressure position it has been for the past 15 years.

In future the SAR chief executive will play the less sexy role of mayor of one of China's smaller cities and regions.

It will be the most advanced of those cities and regions; it will still be special and different, but the SAR executive will be working within transformed circumstances and expectations.

These will inevitably show up in the nature and contents of the policy address. That is, of course, if the SAR chief executive even chooses to

give an annual address before Legco.

This speech, after all, is merely a tradition, not a constitutional obligation, and even Christine Loh in her nearly 100 pages of amendments has not suggested the Basic Law be changed to make it such.

This policy speech may actually have conveyed some of the tone and content of what we will come to expect in the future from the chief executive of the Hong Kong SAR.

While the last Governor has made what are now the nearly obligatory remarks about relations with China at the beginning and end of the speech and the importance of concepts like the rule of law, the vast bulk of the address deals with very local matters in a very local way.

It sounded like a local mayor laying out his priorities and concerns before a city council. Traffic and hospitals, schools and social services, job safety, stable slopes, safe streets and pollution made up the substance of the address.

This is the reality of "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong". The world-shaking issues of democracy and human rights, of being an exemplar of political, economic and social development, of being the source of relations between two sovereign powers and a major worry to scores of others, will fade after 1997 into the far more prosaic reality of being another city on the southern fringe of a rapidly developing China.

This is good, if it happens

that way. It means the realities of governance, of local people electing local representatives who face local problems and solve them in a routine manner in routine interaction with their local civil service.

It means Hong Kong becoming a model of normal governance, of regular civil pride and usual government efficiency.

This is the best hope for our future.

The tone and content of the last Governor's last policy address points the way forward for the SAR chief executive.

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