

# Hong Kong revisited

By **BARONESS WILLIAMS OF CROSBY**

MEMBER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS



**BARONESS WILLIAMS OF CROSBY**

has had a long and extraordinarily distinguished career in both political and academic life. She served as MP for Hitchin and Stevenage from 1964-1979, MP for Crosby from 1981-1983, and was a member of the Cabinet of the British Government from 1974-1979. A co-founder of the Social Democratic Party, she was President of the Party from 1982-1988 and from 2001-2004 served as Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords. Baroness Williams has been a Privy Councillor since 1974 and is a Professor Emeritus at Harvard University's John F Kennedy School of Government.

I first went to Hong Kong in 1965 when I was a young, excited and wet-behind-the ears MP. The amazing island, then virtually the only gateway to a mysterious, menacing China, the largest Communist country in the world, seemed even then a hive of finance, business, shiny new office blocks and industrious people. Many were impressively clever and impressively well educated. I could see no reason at all why they should not enjoy the benefits of democracy.

So our little group of MPs came back to the United Kingdom, and drew up a report (which most of us supported) calling on her Majesty's Government to set a timetable for elections by universal suffrage for the whole of the LegCo and a part of the ExCo. Even we reformers recognised that business and finance would not support a wholly elected ExCo; but we could see no real reason why Hong Kong couldn't move towards a wholly elected LegCo. If the Government, Harold Wilson's, had accepted our recommendations, the story of Hong Kong and of its relations to mainland China would have been very different.

Even then, Hong Kong was a thrilling place. Its Universities and research institutions combined tradition with innovation. Its finance and business sectors anticipated globalisation before the word was even in the lexicons. Its New Territories, then as now, offered a wonderful complementary backdrop of natural beauty, sea and mountains, exotic birds darting and swooping though the bright blue air.

I returned in 1976, on my way to a meeting with the Chinese science and education ministers, to negotiate and sign the first agreement with any European country for an exchange of research studies and research scientists, and for several hundred scholarships enabling Chinese students to attend British Universities. China was stunned by the death of Chairman Mao, and our meetings were held in an atmosphere of almost reverential quiet. They began with my entire delegation from the Department of Education and Science standing with heads bowed before the embalmed body of The Great Helmsman. The contrast with ebullient Hong Kong could not have been greater. China was still a closed society, and communications with Hong Kong were closely controlled.

In 1984 I was back again, invited by the much more open China of Deng Xiaoping to see how China's Universities were doing, and to meet some of the

scholars now returned from the UK. As I travelled around China, I found the mood was changing. If not a hundred, at least some flowers were blooming. But Hong Kong by this time was trying to come to terms with the Anglo-Chinese understanding over a Special Administrative Region, unsure whether the safeguards written into it would be respected on both sides.

I need not go through a litany of all my visits to Hong Kong. I still wish Hong Kong had moved further towards democracy all those long years ago. I respect the courage of the democracy movement and not least of my friend Martin Lee. Whenever democracy and human rights have seemed to be threatened, these determined men and women have rung the alarm bells, and in several instances, taken their alarm on to the streets, to the warm response of most of Hong Kong's people. But I recognise too that China has on the whole reacted with restraint, and has backed away from any serious confrontation.

It is a delicate business. There will be further moves towards democracy as a result of Donald Tsang's cautious reforms. It would be good to move a little faster. But much depends on Beijing's willingness to move.

Hong Kong is indispensable to China as a financial centre, one that last year raised more capital than either Tokyo or London, and that gives investors the assurance of a rule of law based on internationally familiar norms. As China's trade and currency transactions grow yet further, so will Hong Kong's role.

It is of course not all roses. The People's Republic has a perceived problem of corruption, not least in local and provincial government. It will some day – not long off – have to tackle environmental pollution, which is spreading to a formerly clean Hong Kong. It will have to address the threatening imbalance between western and eastern China, in terms of standards of living and of income per head. And it will before long have to start on the political development towards democracy and human rights that has been stunted ever since the brief dawn of SunYat-sen.

On all these issues, Hong Kong has something to offer China – its familiarity with the world and with best practice in it, its considerable environmental achievements and its administration of public services, to mention only three. The partnership won't always be easy, but it will be greatly to the benefit of both – and of the world beyond – if it can be made to work. **F**