

Hong Kong needs nothing but democracy

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Democracy

When six years ago the British lowered the Union Jack on their last remaining important colony, Hong Kong, Chris Patten, the governor, buried his face in his hands, for the entire world to see, and felt the profoundest sentiment a proud and ambitious politician could experience — failure.

It was indeed a personal failure to be added to his other great misfortune, the timing of elections back home in Britain that made it impossible for him to become prime minister. But on that damp evening it was the people of Hong Kong, those who knew him well could tell, that pierced his conscience. The British had let them down. They were giving up a colony having unaccountably failed to bequeath it with a functioning democracy.

In every country except Palestine in 1948 — when the top British officials literally dropped the keys to their secretariat on the steps of the closed UN office before flying out at midnight — the British left behind an elected leadership and a popular elected legislature. Yet even when the British did this right, in almost every case, seemingly built into the decolonisation process, there was a tragic mistake that would work over time to undermine the stability that the old imperial Empire had prided itself on.

In India, the jewel of the crown, the British, thanks to a series of imperious and wrong-headed decisions made by the viceroy, Earl Mountbatten, to whom London had unwisely entrusted too much power, the British left as hundreds of thousands people were dying in the carnage triggered by the last minute division of the subcontinent into a secular Hindu dominated state and a religious Islamic one, Pakistan.

In his new book, "The Dust of Empire", Karl Meyer records how Mountbatten swept aside all the compromises that leaders would have been able to accept or at least swallow, and decided for partition.

In Africa, boundaries were the least of Britain's worries. These had been settled by joint imperial diktat at the Conference of Berlin in 1884. But experience was another matter.

Whilst the British had known for a long time that India would have to go its own way, in Africa the idea was resisted, at least until the 1960s when suddenly, too suddenly, a Conservative government believed it had to give way before the rising agitation of the black middle class for independence, although it meant, as in Zambia, leaving when there only 17 university graduates.

But even in those territories where the British had done better than that there was a dearth of home grown experience in dealing with the great issues of the modern African world — economic development and inter-tribal governance. Africa quickly fell part, as Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist, put it, and now almost everywhere countries are having to be put back together, brick by brick.

In Hong Kong it was rather different. On the one hand the British had made such a success of giving a paternal guiding hand to instinctive Chinese go-getting that by the time of the shedding of the colonial burden Hong Kong was such a powerhouse in every modern way — economic, financial, administrative, medical, educational and artistic — that there was no doubt that the deepest foundations had been dug for life ahead.

But on the other hand, the British, until the time of the premiership of Margaret Thatcher, seemed to think they could rule this exceptional corner of the world for ever, despite the fact that British rule rested on a fast expiring lease from China. And, even if Thatcher with her forthright common sense could see what others couldn't, she was as blinkered as any past generations had been on failing to see the importance of the need to plant deep the seeds of democracy.

Chinese.

Beijing knew that the people with money in Hong Kong, the capitalist barons, wanted to ingratiate themselves with the new master-to-be. They were able to create a shadow government out of this class and its supporters and simply moved them into place, ignoring the Patten-reformed legislature, the moment the Chinese flag was raised.

But Patten did leave something behind, a commitment by China that Hong Kong would move toward democracy in 2007. China knows if it is ever to woo Taiwan it is going to have to honor that promise.

The massive demonstration in Hong Kong on July 1 against a new security bill and by implication in favor of more democracy has made that promise even more difficult to break. Beijing really has no choice to take up what is in fact its only option.

If it wants the stability and economic success in Hong Kong it craves for, democracy is the solution. Whilst it is struggling to work out this difficult conundrum its "viceroy", chief executive Tung Chee-hwa, will go on making more awful mistakes just as Mountbatten did and make life for everyone more difficult. It's up to Beijing to see the way ahead with a rather clearer eye than the British did in 1947.