

My Lords, Hong Kong had everything going for it, including a fabulous future as part of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay area, which was and still is destined to be one of the richest, most innovative and powerful regions on the entire planet. Mention of the British national (overseas) passport issue sent me to my filing cabinet, where a dusty file reminded me that 24 years ago I had the privilege of leading the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee to a five-day inquiry in the old LegCo on Hong Kong island, where we conducted hearings on exactly the same issue: whether the British national (overseas) passport should give right of abode to the United Kingdom. We concluded that it should not, but that we thought that certain categories of people should be admitted. They have been admitted progressively under quotas since then. We thought that the passport status was part of the Sino-British declaration that had been signed a year before in 1994, that we should leave it as part of the declaration, and that we should respect the whole declaration because we hoped and believed that it would give Hong Kong 50 years of prosperity and stability.

For 20 years it did, but what on earth went wrong? We know that the clumsy extradition law was the trigger and that it has now been withdrawn. However, in my view there is blame that lies in Beijing, in London and in Hong Kong itself. Whether we like it or not, the international legal position is clear. Under the declaration and our agreements, Hong Kong is now a sovereign part of the People's Republic of China. The joint declaration was always based on an understanding that in the future, after signature, there would be a degree of trust and respect, along with constant dialogue with Beijing, as well as with the Hong Kong authorities, on the necessary reform and modernisation that has taken place, given that the whole world has been completely transformed since those days.

There was also a degree of ambiguity and compromise in the declaration. There had to be—there always is in these complicated situations. One problem is that in the digital age, when everyone is pushed to extremes, moderation is cast aside and all nuances are neglected, there is hyper-communication that is very difficult to handle because everyone is driven to taking extreme positions. For instance, China simply carries on asserting that the declaration is null and void and Britain has nothing to do with it and should stay out of the picture, while we, the other hand, keep on bravely asserting a point that is legally true, which that it is a binding agreement. These are counter-assertions that get us nowhere. They are exactly the sort of megaphone diplomacy that the father of the noble Lord, Lord Carrington, warned us against many decades ago. There has to be a dialogue of

respect, trust and understanding, and the positive necessity is for that to be recreated now.

I think it was the former Prime Minister John Major who said to the people of Hong Kong, “We will never forget you”, but in fact we did forget them. We forgot the essential dialogue element needed to keep the situation under proper control. It is now utterly in China’s interests to see the Hong Kong situation restored and pacified. It is also utterly in Hong Kong’s interests to see that it reassumes its place in the fantastic and fabulous financial future as a hub of the whole world’s system of modern government and trade.

What do we need now and what can we can do? We can urge that a detailed inquiry be held into the grievances. It may be that a new Chief Executive is required to bring a new approach to the whole situation. Above all, we need full and continuing dialogue with the PRC and the people in Beijing, who are not totally ignorant of what is happening or the dangers it poses for China and everyone else, about what was intended when we signed the declaration and how it needs to be constantly nurtured and reformed. That is where we should put all our efforts. It is something we have not done; now we should start doing it.

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