

BOOK REVIEW

## Man in a Hurry: Murray MacLehose and Colonial Autonomy in Hong Kong

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Sir Murray MacLehose, Hong Kong's longest-serving governor (1971–1982), was probably the single individual most responsible for setting Hong Kong on trajectories it would follow up to the 1997 transition and beyond, in terms of becoming a city that invested significantly in the wellbeing of its population by providing publicly funded housing, education, healthcare and social services. MacLehose was also the first governor to visit China officially after 1949 (though Sir Alexander Grantham, his almost equally long-serving and influential predecessor-but-two, made an unofficial trip to Beijing in 1955, where he met with Premier Zhou Enlai).

Ray Yep's closely researched study of MacLehose's time in Hong Kong is not a full-scale biography. Nor does it claim to offer a comprehensive account of his governorship. Instead, Yep focuses on four major issues MacLehose addressed: corruption, the provision of social welfare services, handling growing numbers of Vietnamese refugees, and opening the subject of Hong Kong's post-1997 future with Chinese officials. Yep uses this quartet as case studies through which to undertake in-depth exploration of the intricacies of power relationships between the supposedly sovereign British government in Hong Kong and the ostensibly subordinate colonial administration in Hong Kong. Central to this inquiry are the related questions of just how much autonomy the governor in practice enjoyed, and the degree to which he represented and spoke for the interests of Hong Kong and its people (at least as he perceived these) as opposed to those of its colonial overlord.

The answers Yep provides are based primarily on extensive research in official British documents, most readily available from the National Archives in Kew and also in digital electronic format. Supplementing these are MacLehose's own extensive oral history, plus those recorded by other Hong Kong officials and British diplomats; official Hong Kong publications; contemporary British and Hong Kong newspaper reports from both the English and Chinese press; and a wide range of memoirs and secondary sources. Although Yep begins the book by recounting his own schoolboy impressions of MacLehose, he might perhaps have tried to supplement this impressive roster of materials by deploying rather more in the way of personal recollections and assessments of the governor and his accomplishments, drawn from Britain, Hong Kong, China and elsewhere. But this is a minor omission.

On one level, no governor of Hong Kong in the 1970s could have avoided tackling the problems of corruption, the expansion of social welfare and the arrival of tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees in the territory. As Yep rightly points out, Sir David Trench, MacLehose's predecessor, whose relationship with the British Foreign Office in London was notoriously fraught, had already initiated action on corruption, especially within the police force, and with London's backing had begun planning a major increase in social services. Both were matters on which, following the wake-up call of the 1967 riots, London believed reform was overdue. Yep demonstrates that

MacLehose, on better terms with British officialdom, and with an Independent Commission Against Corruption already in existence, proved adept in persuading the metropole to allow Hong Kong to clean its own house, as opposed to passing British parliamentary legislation for the purpose.

What the fiscally conservative MacLehose did not fully realise until taking office was that multiple concerns within Britain – including the resentment British manufacturers and labour unions alike harboured toward the unfair market advantages they believed minimal social protections in Hong Kong gave to Hong Kong-made products – were driving pressure for upgrading conditions in the territory. British Labour governments, in power until 1970 and again from 1974 to 1979, had already drafted a blueprint for sweeping change, one that MacLehose and his Financial Secretary, Philip Haddon-Cave, considered too ambitious, as did many Hong Kong businessmen. Ultimately, in the time-honoured spirit of British compromise, half-measures triumphed; major reforms in housing, education, healthcare and social policy were implemented, but social security proposals fell by the wayside, sacrificed to budgetary and fiscal considerations.

Yep indicates that no such wiggle room existed on the issue of Vietnamese boat people, the refugees who began arriving in Hong Kong in large numbers after 1975. With anti-immigrant sentiment rising, Britain was prepared to admit very few of these unfortunates. Despite local resentment, Hong Kong found itself hosting and largely financing massive holding camps for refugees, a relatively small number of whom the city accepted, though the majority ultimately moved on to other international destinations (with the residue repatriated to Vietnam before 1997). When what successive British governments considered core interests were at stake, the metropole would not compromise. Hong Kong was expected to pay the price, a pattern that throughout the 1950s had characterized British subordination of Hong Kong economic interests to US embargo policy toward China, as well as the 1967 devaluation of sterling and the 1971 Immigration Act. Back in London, putting Hong Kong first, or even taking its interests into consideration, was never a priority.

Yep's final issue is the future of Hong Kong. MacLehose had no wish to provoke the mainland Communist government unnecessarily. His close friend, the journalist Clare Hollingworth, recalled how, when he noticed overly prominent displays of Nationalist Taiwan flags for the October 10th anniversary as they drove out to the governor's weekend retreat in Fanling, he would suggest that these should be removed. As Yep suggests, the British were conscious that their continued presence in Hong Kong depended on Chinese tolerance. From time to time, MacLehose apparently stated that all China needed do to take back Hong Kong was to cut off the water.

Interestingly, though, MacLehose belonged to a generation of Chinese and Western figures, and sometimes other nationalities, who had gone through the Second World War and its preliminaries together, and for whom those years were a formative experience. They knew and understood each other, had collaborated in intelligence operations, had little respect for protocols, and functioned on the same wavelength. MacLehose's effort to open conversations on this subject may well have been driven by his sense that his own contemporaries were still in control. Certainly, in an oral history recorded in 2003, Sir David Wilson, MacLehose's successor-but-one as governor, who served as British Political Adviser in Hong Kong under MacLehose, remembered how, when MacLehose learned that the influential Chinese official Liao Chengzhi, head of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, whose contacts and covert activities in Hong Kong dated back to the 1930s, would be visiting Hong Kong privately, he arranged to meet Liao discreetly in the Chinese guest-house on the Peak, where they "had a very good discussion about Hong Kong." When representing Hong Kong at a 1979 United Nations conference on Vietnamese refugee boat people, MacLehose likewise informed the Chinese of his plans in advance.

Even if they ultimately proved fruitless, given the looming deadline, his intentions to open the subject of the potential 1997 transition through the issue of land leases in the New Territories were perhaps not entirely misguided. MacLehose's early overtures on the subject seem to have

been a bow drawn at a venture, with London effectively a spectator, not a participant. As Yep notes, however, despite initial proposals by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that British administration of Hong Kong should continue even after 1997, from the 1950s onward the British Foreign Office assumed that eventually, Hong Kong would inevitably return to China.

The driving preoccupation of Yep's volume is undoubtedly an effort to discern whether the post-1997 government of Hong Kong can establish a relationship with Beijing modelled on the situation that prevailed under MacLehose, with the governor (and his predecessors) often fighting Hong Kong's corner in negotiations with London. Indeed, he states: "The jury is, however, still out on whether Beijing fully understood what it would take to sustain capitalist Hong Kong in economic as well as socio-political terms" (p. 169). His volume tacitly highlights both the ability of British officials in Hong Kong to live with ambivalence, looking over their shoulders at China's requirements while running the territory, and the matching sophistication of top Chinese policymakers and diplomats from the late 1940s until at least the early 1980s.

The analogy with today's Hong Kong is questionable. When running Hong Kong MacLehose, the last pre-Joint Declaration governor, could utilize assorted feedback mechanisms that, while not completely democratic, allowed its government to respond to popular and elite local pressures and adjust course accordingly. Increasingly, and most especially in the 2020s, authorities in post-1997 Hong Kong have jettisoned such communication channels, instead resorting to a one-sided dialogue of telling Hong Kong people how they must behave, what they are expected to think and who may represent them, with Beijing passing legislation on Hong Kong's behalf. The British, moreover, always had the possibility of leaving should their position in Hong Kong become untenable, an option seriously considered on occasions. Even though no post-handover Chief Executive of Hong Kong has yet managed to complete two terms of office successfully, such leeway is unavailable to the current authorities in Hong Kong.