CHAPTER 2

The Omelco Consensus

As the name OMELCO has become obsolete it is necessary to explain briefly what it means. It stands for the Office of the Executive and Legislative Council, and included all Legislative Councillors and those appointed to the cabinet known as the Executive Council.

The head of the Executive Council was the Governor who made the appointments, and their duty was to accept responsibility and protect confidentiality with regard to its decisions. It also had the responsibility of explaining Government policies to the Legislative Council and try to obtain their support. By and large it succeeded in that duty, though as politics entered into the Legislative Council; it became less and less effective.

It is uncertain where the movement began for calling for fifty percent of the Legislative Council to be elected before 1997, but it may have sprung from a speech made by the Foreign Secretary in Parliament to introduce a Bill of Rights and a greater degree of democracy. No one doubted that the purpose was to offer some kind of compensation for disallowing Hong Kong British passport holders the right of residence in Britain; in spite of strong representations on that issue near the end of 1989.

By this time, Martin Lee had the nucleus of a political party on the Legislative Council, but the move to put fifty percent of the seats for direct election was supported by almost all if not all members. In those days we seldom counted votes but decided on voice votes.

Martin Lee's party had become very vociferous after the tragedy on 4 June 1989, and this proved to be the party's greatest capital investment. Regardless of the fact that there was an outpouring of grief throughout Hong Kong, and no doubt on both sides in China, they claimed this for their party and have used it for election purposes ever since. In all their electioneering, in all their pamphlets, on all possible occasions, they remind the people of that day, as if it belonged to them and only they could be the saviours of the people of Hong Kong. The core members of the party are all male, and on no occasion did they put up a woman candidate for election until 1998 when, possibly because of criticism they put up a woman candidate in two districts, but as the voting system is by proportional representation, it was obvious that with their names at the bottom of the list, it was only a token gesture. I mention this point because whenever a motion on human rights or equal rights is moved, they invariably speak strongly for women but do not practise what they preach, either in this or other issues.

Claiming to be democrats, they tolerate no party but those who agree with them, belying their claim to pluralism. Claiming to support transparency, they are by no means transparent, and younger members not in the core membership have told me that they do not know how decisions are made, nor are they asked their views, but merely told how to vote, and their whip, Szeto Wah, makes sure that they do as they are ordered, though I am not denying that some may willingly vote as advised.

I mention all these points because even on the OMELCO consensus, they claim the last word, as if they alone supported it. The proposal that fifty percent of the seats on the Legislative
Council should be elected by direct election was actually first mooted by the Senior Member of the Executive Council at an in-house meeting of OMELECO, in November 1989. The proposal called for the Basic Law, which had already been distributed in draft form to members, to be amended so as to expand the elected membership in 1995 to fifty percent, an arrangement that, if accepted by China, would have bridged over the transition and remained in place until 1999, when the next elections would be held.

A motion to that effect was debated and passed by a majority. The Hong Kong Government was instructed to seek agreement from Beijing. As might have been expected, China said that the Basic Law had been discussed and put before the National People's Congress. There was no possibility of making such a major change, coming, as it did, from a colonial body like the Legislative Council which had never taken part in the Sino-British negotiations. It may be worth mentioning at this point that Martin Lee and Szeto Wah who had originally been appointed as members of the Basic Law Drafting Committee, had resigned from the committee on 4 June. I was present when they did so in Happy Valley. I was a genuine mourner for the dead, and even more for the sad turn of events in China. I had hoped China would lead the world to a more compromising political system between the two extremes of right and left. Although we present had all heard Lee and Szeto resign from the lawdrafting committee, they were later to say that they had been "thrown off". The fact is that after resigning they tried to return but China refused to accept them. In the same way they have claimed that they were thrown off the Legislative Council in 1997, when the fact is that when their breaking of the Basic Law resulted in the setting up of an interim Legislature, they were invited to stand for election and refused. They would probably have retained their seats if they had joined as candidates. I mention these incidents to show how these politicians can distort facts to put a different complexion on their actions.

If anyone thinks that China should have accepted the recommendations of OMELECO whatever they might propose, such person should consider the system under the British. Britain had never consulted the Hong Kong people on its actions as China had on the Basic Law. Few people knew of the existence of the British Constitution known as the Letters Patent and the Royal Instructions, and fewer still were aware of the arrogance of those documents that claimed that all the land of Hong Kong belonged to the British Sovereign "and his or her heirs forever". Governors were appointed by the Crown on the recommendation alone of the British Prime Minister, and members of the Executive Council (and until recently the Legislative Council) on the recommendation of the Governor of Hong Kong. The Hong Kong public never had any say. Britain herself had taken hundreds of years and the United States about a hundred and fifty years to reach universal franchise, China was offering full democracy in ten years from the resumption of sovereignty. Can she be faulted on that? Taking the fast road to democracy had done nothing for Russia. Universal franchise soon led to the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, who used the army to fire on his own Parliament Building, and who has several times played the dictator by dismissing his Government. The Russian people have cried out more than once, "Give us bread, not democracy." Can China afford to go the same way as Russia? Anyone who claims so is no friend of the Chinese people.
The rejection of the OMELECO consensus may have been a big disappointment to those who had hoped to grab power for their political party, but it was no big deal to those who had never lived under a democratic system. There was no need to turn it into a reason for confrontation with China. But for those bent on confrontation with China, any reason was enough to disturb the population with demonstrations and threats of future doom under Chinese sovereignty.

When China rejected the OMELECO consensus, Allen Lee raised another motion urging the community to be united and to continue to work towards a democratic system. There was plenty of scope within the Basic Law as finally drafted by China. Most of the members who spoke that day called for compromise, while expressing disappointment, since in politics there is always room for compromise, except on the part of those persons who always consider their own way the only way, people like Martin Lee. I had myself been calling for democratic progress by the British for three decades without any success, so this comparatively small issue was not difficult to compromise. It is a fact that a new convert to a cause is always more uncompromising than a person who has always believed in the cause. I noticed that in Martin Lee, when he gave up smoking himself but would not tolerate anyone who did not follow his example. Martin had very recently taken up the democratic cause and expected everyone to be equally uncompromising.

At that debate, I said: "As we grow older we are supposed to grow wiser, but maybe some of us merely become more obstinate. Of course, I am not referring to anyone in this chamber. As for myself, there is one thing in which I claim to have grown wiser. It is that I now realise that when the chips are down, there is nothing more we can do except pick ourselves up and look for other ways to succeed. If we stop to flog a dead horse we may miss the rest of the race. The race in this case is 1997, and the apparently dead horse is the political model which we still think is best for Hong Kong. I doubt if anyone can bring that horse back to life. I think everyone agrees that the Joint Declaration laid a good foundation upon which to build a completely democratic structure for Hong Kong." I also said during that debate, "We must make sure that we have true freedom of the press and other media which should be the mouthpiece of democracy. At the same time the media should hold truth more valuable than sensation. I hope that our community will unite, stand firm, and have no fear of the future."

Allen Lee's motion was agreed by a large majority, and there the matter should have rested as a majority vote. But the anti-China faction would not let the matter rest. The arrival of Mr. Patten only helped to revive what most members had long accepted and could have lived with comfortably, but other forces were already working behind the scenes to attempt to destabilise Hong Kong and prevent a smooth transition to Chinese sovereignty except under their own personal or party conditions or maybe even of their foreign mentors.