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ASIAN MODELS DISEASE

There are many good things about Dr Muhamad Mahathir. Probably the best of them is that his job as Prime Minister of Malaysia keeps him some 7,000 miles distant from Britain, such that his periodic lectures on the dangers of democracy, the decline of the West, the rise of Asia, the triumph of Malaysia and the invigorating leadership of Dr Mahathir himself can be heard here, much more faintly and fitfully than in Malaysia itself, where they are held to embody a new and great wisdom.

Support for the 'Asian model' of development so dear to Dr Mahathir is shared just as fervently by Malaysia's neighbours. Past and present leaders of Singapore whose misfortune it has been to see their talents for international redressment limited by a caprice of Fate to the running of a society approximating more to a modern housing estate than to a vast and complex country are particularly forthright in condemning the decadence of a West. We are, they argue, so bound up in our concern for human rights and freedoms that we neglect the really important things in life, such as cars and mobile telephones.

The 'Asian model' argues not so much that authoritarian government is a regrettable but necessary price to pay for economic growth; it argues that authoritarian government and economic growth are absolute virtues, and the combination of them a recipe for supreme happiness. Measured against the 'Asian model', Burma is a half-way decent country; Indonesia is testing the limits of liberalism; while communist China, with its landscape of massacres, gulags and feral greed, is the hope and wonder of the modern world — a view propagated nowadays not only by China itself, but also by credulous, short-sighted and self-interested businessmen, investment bankers and diplomats around the world. The problem with the Asian model — or perhaps more properly the danger, in that its supposed virtues can appear persuasive in the mouths of prophets subtler than Dr Mahathir — is that it is founded upon a misconception. It is true that Asian countries have produced startling economic growth rates over the past

30 years, for which they deserve much praise. It is also true that some have had authoritarian governments. But that does not make the one the result of the other.

On the contrary, the economic rise of Asia was made possible by precisely the western liberalism which the 'Asian model' affects to condemn. It was Europe and America that bought the exports from which the newly-industrialising countries of the east grew rich. It was Europe and America that supplied the region with its internal and external security. It was Europe and America that sponsored the emergence of societies subscribing to democratic values and the rule of law. Those commodities supplied a bedrock for better government and so for prosperity in much of Asia. Asian countries helped themselves by pursuing wise economic policies, the essence of which was to couple export-led industrial growth with thriftiness at home. But those policies were pursued with equal facility in places as otherwise different as democratic Japan, once-dictatorial South Korea, and Victorian-liberal Hong Kong. Authoritarianism had nothing to do with it, and protestations to the contrary now are no more than special pleading by leaders grown too fond of power who discover a shared interest in arguing that Asia is naturally disposed towards dictatorship.

The truth of that argument is, as it happens, far from academic. Britain's handling of the Hong Kong question had reflected, prior to Christopher Patten's arrival there as governor, a willingness to accept the premise of an 'Asian model', to believe that authoritarianism was somehow the birthright of British citizens in Asia in the same way that democracy was the birthright of British citizens in Britain.

Mr Patten has been fighting that prejudice, bravely if probably vainly, and he has just secured at least one remarkable victory along the way: a sotto voce admission from the Foreign Office of its own fundamental error of judgment. Last week's Hong Kong White Paper, presented by the Foreign Secretary, conceded in its conclusion the common-sense proposition that the rule of law was the 'heart' of Hong Kong's 'stability and prosperity'. It then dropped this small bombshell: 'It is difficult to envisage the maintenance of the rule of law in a community where the legislative body is neither fairly elected nor free from the possibility of manipulation'. In other words, Britain's own past willingness to deny full democracy and so please China was dooming Hong Kong to disaster.

A vigorously democratic and prosperous Hong Kong might have been the best possible way of showing Malaysia, Singapore, China and the other Asian model-advocates that certain values, democracy and freedom among them, were of universal merit. But,

because that truth would have been intolerable to China at least, they are threatening to bind and gag the colony when 1997 comes, whatever Mr Patten does now. The 'Asian model' is proving, in fact, to be something rather close to a Pro- crustean bed. To fit on to it comfortably, first cut off your tongue and voting arm.

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