

# AN INTERVIEW WITH RAYMOND CHAN



by Gerald Lamoureux

Canada's first Secretary of State for the Asia Pacific Region is quickly learning that being in politics means that everything you have said and done, past and present, comes under a microscope.

When Hong Kong-born Raymond Chan won a seat during the federal election in his Richmond, B.C. riding last October, he was only the third Chinese-Canadian to be elected a Member of Parliament. A few days later, this 42-year old Vancouver engineer and businessman was appointed to the newly-created position of Secretary of State for the Asia Pacific Region.

The history of Chan's family is familiar. His father was a soldier in Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist army during the 1930s. When the Communists took over in 1949, Chan's father and mother fled to Hong Kong. In 1969, at the age of 17, Chan was sponsored by his sister to immigrate to Canada.

Chan, who speaks fluent Cantonese and Mandarin, attended the University of British Columbia and worked for 16 years in its physics research facility. He has also owned and operated two restaurants in Vancouver.

But what has captured public attention is his work with the Vancouver Society in

Support of the Democratic Movement in China. It was as Chairman of this organization that he was expelled from China just three years ago while protesting in Beijing in support of Chinese dissidents.

Today, Chan insists there is no conflict between his past support of the pro-democracy movement in China and his new appointment. "All along, I've seen myself as a Canadian advocating human rights for China, an activity I've pursued as a friend to both the Chinese government and people," he says.

According to Chan, Guangdong officials did not seem bothered by his past human rights activities and gave him the "red carpet treatment" during his visit there in early January.

Although Chan makes no secret of the fact that human rights issues in China concern him, he opposes using economic sanctions to pressure Beijing. Instead, he feels that cultural, social, and economic exchanges are more effective ways to encourage democracy and respect for human rights.

While Chan stresses that his views as Secretary of State haven't changed from his pre-politics days, there is some evidence that they have, at the very least, evolved.

In 1991, as Chairman of the Vancouver Society in Support of the Democratic Movement in China, Chan wrote a letter to the Vancouver Sun which stated: "This is not an appropriate time for Bill McKnight, our Minister of Agriculture, to be visiting China - a gesture which will be interpreted as an endorsement of the hard-line policies of the People's Republic of China on human rights and political reform...There might be western countries such as Japan willing to sacrifice their support for human rights and democracy for political expediency or investment favouritism and trade opportunities. However, many others stand firm on human rights issues."

As Secretary of State for Asia Pacific, Chan's focus is two-fold. He intends to support the efforts of Foreign Affairs and International Trade by assisting in the development of Asian economies and society through the advancement of government, legal and political processes, and country resources. He says he

will also help develop Canada's bilateral relationships fostering trade and other opportunities for Canadian businesses.

Chan is working with International Trade Minister, Roy McLaren, to review how the government and private sector can coordinate efforts to help small and medium-sized businesses enter Asia.

"What we need to do is alert Canadian industries of the potentials in Asia. A lot of them aren't export oriented to Asia because of the proximity of the U.S.," he says.

"Canadian technologies and know-how are complementary to Asian industries, so what we want to do is provide support to small and medium-sized businesses to establish partnerships, joint ventures, and trading opportunities so that individuals explore the market and see the potential in the Asia Pacific region."

As Secretary of State for Asia Pacific, Chan's views on 1997 are also under scrutiny.

Before his appointment to the Privy Council, he warned that Hong Kong residents had much to worry about in 1997. Today, Chan downplays the dangers. "China, being part of the international community, should and would respect the agreement they have signed," he says. "We expect China to behave rationally."

While not having the power or full privileges of a cabinet minister, Chan still influences cabinet decisions. He is often invited to sit in on cabinet discussions, has access to cabinet documents, and has better access to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade than he would have as a Member of Parliament.

While Prime Minister Jean Chretien cut the size of cabinet, Chan's addition as Secretary of State for Asia Pacific signals Canada's commitment to the region. While it is not clear at this point how Liberal policy in the Asia region will differ from that of the Conservatives, Chan says that the creation of his portfolio is evidence of a change which will result in a much higher level of contact between Canada and Asia Pacific countries. ♦

