

Harbour commission would end government conflict of interests

I refer to your excellent editorial ("A harbour commission to right years of neglect", August 11) regarding the proposal by the Harbourfront Enhancement Committee to set up an independent harbour commission to oversee the harbour and the harbourfront.

Society for Protection of the Harbour first proposed such an idea more than five years ago, but the government did not respond. We believe it did not reply because it faced two fundamental dilemmas.

The government has conflicting roles, both as the administration of Hong Kong responsible for protecting the harbour and the environment, and as the city's biggest real estate owner with the largest land bank for sale to developers.

Consequently, instead of respecting the harbour and the harbourfront as Hong Kong's greatest natural and environmental assets, the government has always regarded them as gold mines for producing revenue through land sales. The central location of the harbour and the fantastic views offered by harbourfront developments make the

reclaimed land far more valuable than the abundant land in the New Territories.

Therefore, the first dilemma is that the protector is also the main offender.

Secondly, the government should be enforcing the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance. Instead, it is the main culprit in trying to reclaim the harbour despite the ordinance. It has been trying to get around the ordinance, for example, by using the excuse of temporary reclamation which the High Court rejected last year.

The present situation is very strange: it is up to the public and organisations like our society to seek enforcement of the law, against the government.

Therefore the second dilemma is that the enforcer of the law is also the main transgressor.

The proposed harbour commission must resolve these two dilemmas by taking the harbour and the harbourfront out of the control of the government and instead entrusting their future to trustworthy representatives of the public.

Winston K. S. Chu, adviser, Society for Protection of the Harbour