

Democracy or Colonialism? The Self Interest Behind Britain's Concern for "Democracy" in Hong Kong

By [Peter Bloom](#)

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The pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong have reignited, with new waves of occupation and police repression. And despite global interest, Chinese leaders have warned international onlookers against interfering in what they see as an [internal affair](#).

Now, MPs from the British parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee have been barred from entering the region as part of an [inquiry](#) into relations between the UK and its former colony.

Their committee has been an especially vocal proponent of respect for Hong Kong's democracy in the past, and it wasted no time accusing the Chinese government of acting in an "overtly confrontational manner" in telling its members to stay away.

The UK Foreign Office, for its part, has called the decision "regrettable" and suggested that China's stance contradicts talk in recent months of China and the UK having "shared interests" in Hong Kong.

This incident raises questions about the extent to which the UK should press Beijing to maintain the democratic commitments made to Hong Kong when it was ceded to China in 1997. But the UK's position on Hong Kong are much more self-interested than all the idealistic democratic rhetoric suggests.

In their outrage, the unwelcome MPs are presenting themselves as disinterested supporters of Hong Kong democracy. Yet this is only one part of the story. The other is that Hong Kong remains a vital British financial concern.

The UK has remained a strong financial presence in the territory, even after 1997. Indeed, almost half of all foreign financial claims in Hong Kong are still from British banks, and the British financial sector continues to worry about the potential global repercussions of a [downturn](#) in Hong Kong's booming property market.

The former coloniser has an increasing financial stake in Hong Kong, and it's pursuing a strategy to incorporate the region into a wider global economic network. Ultimately, it wants to both maximise its investment in the area and act as a go-between for capital moving through the area.

Democracy or colonisation?

Hong Kong's evolution into a major financial hub has brought many economic benefits, but it's also led to significant political and economic problems. There are also social problems,

particularly rampant inequality, which is in turn driving up marginalisation.

The [Occupy Central](#) movement reflects this contradiction. What started as a push for political democracy and economic equality has been backed by those who share the UK's vision of a democratic and decidedly pro-business Hong Kong.

This more "financialised" Hong Kong's democracy was outlined by former hedge fund manager Edward Chin in an open letter to the Chinese government in April 2014. The letter called for greater democracy and was signed by 170 other figures from the world of finance. It warned that "the current political climate in Hong Kong is having a negative impact to Hong Kong's competitiveness as a major financial centre in Asia."

But much of the original support for the protests in Hong Kong stemmed from anger at China's apparent attempt to impose its culture on the region. This reflected fears that the mainland was not only trying to rule the people, but to colonise them too. The movement is therefore both anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial.

And while it's publicly championing democratic political values such as openness and universal suffrage, the UK is also working to maintain its other interests in Hong Kong, in particular its financial interests, and to further its competitive advantage in the region.

While the fight for genuine representation and popular sovereignty should be championed, it is also important to ensure that democracy does not become another name for foreign exploitation.

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