

Condom peddling Miss America rouses the right

by Christopher Goodwin
Los Angeles

BEAUTY queens have traditionally been gawped at, not listened to. When Kate Shindle was crowned Miss America last September, however, the country got a lot more than just a pretty face.

Shindle, 21, is provoking outrage among conservatives and religious fundamentalists by promoting the distribution of condoms to schoolchildren and needle-exchange programmes for drug addicts in an attempt to curb the spread of Aids.

Past Miss Americas have tended to promote less troubling ideas, such as world peace. But Shindle, who has taken a year's sabbatical from her drama and sociology studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, has rarely removed her rhinestone tiara from its box.

Focusing her energies where the virus is spreading fastest — "among racial minorities, women and especially among young people" — she travels 20,000 miles a month to preach sexual abstinence, monogamous relationships, safer sex, clean needles, testing and treatment.

The stance has won plaudits from Aids groups, social workers and liberal politicians. But when Shindle recently travelled to South Carolina she was handed copies of the state and district laws governing health and sex education.

"Talking to students, I could not use the words 'homosexual', 'heterosexual', 'gay', 'straight' or 'lesbian'," she said. "I couldn't talk about condom distribution or needle exchange, or any kind of alternative lifestyles. It's laughable."

Shindle, an anti-abortion Catholic Republican from a conservative family, insists that political correctness has nothing to do with her campaign. "When a family friend was diagnosed with Aids, the epidemic took on a human face for me and the war on Aids became something of a personal crusade," she said.

Some students, however, are more interested in hearing about the Miss America pageant, and at least one of Shindle's predecessors has taken exception. Venus Ramey, the 1944 winner, said: "I come from an era when we had a name for girls who hand out condoms, and it wasn't Miss America."



Miss with a mission: Kate Shindle has used her title to promote Aids awareness

Chinese face Hong Kong poll rebuff

by Michael Sheridan
Hong Kong

IT IS hard to be lonely in the most crowded urban area on earth. Yet Martin Lee, Hong Kong's ousted democratic leader, looked painfully alone as he handed out leaflets to commuters on one of the dirtiest and busiest crossroads in the nightclub district of Wanchai.

"We don't really have a problem here," Lee shouted above the traffic, the vendors in the Chinese market and the mobile phones. As a black transvestite in high heels and a miniskirt tottered by, Lee, a Roman Catholic barrister, concentrated his smile and his handshakes on the homeward-bound office workers.

Two elderly ladies, who gave their names as Yip and Wong, took the leaflets and promised to tell their relatives to vote for the Democrats. "I support the party because they're willing to challenge the government," said Yip. A few others, however, ignored Lee or refused to look him in the eye.

In every opinion poll for Hong Kong's first election under Chinese rule, most voters indicate that on May 24, election day, they will return Lee's Democratic party and its allies to the colonial-era Legislative Council chamber. They had been evicted on the night Britain left Hong Kong and Chris Patten, the architect of democratic reform, sailed away on the royal yacht Britannia. If Patten's limited democracy had survived in Hong Kong, Lee would probably be running this prosperous Chinese territory of 6m entrepreneurial people. Instead he is doggedly canvassing voters in the street.

In his secluded office high above the miasma of Wanchai, the man who does run Hong Kong — Lee's enemy, Tung Chee-hwa — is not looking forward to the results. The Asian economic crisis, rising unemployment, lethal "bird flu", a series of food scares and a plague of red algae that killed off local fish, have all combined to turn the fruits of triumph sour for the millionaire shipping tycoon appointed by China as chief executive of Hong Kong.

Tung rarely talks directly to the Hong Kong media or its people, and would certainly never be seen handing out leaflets on a street corner. On his occasional public outings, he exudes benign authority, but when Lee's mother died last December the chief executive declined to fulfil the normal

be rejected by the voters. Robbed of a British colonial oppressor to unite them in opposition, the ranks of the patriots appear divided by the age-old Chinese politics of class and wealth. It may not help that, during the campaign, Tung is off on another first-class trip abroad to promote his shopworn message that it is "business as usual" in Hong Kong. Tsang concedes that the election is, in fact, "indirectly" a referendum on Tung's 10 months in office.

Speaking on a radio phone-in for candidates which was conducted on a noisy Kowloon housing estate, Tsang promised the audience to do his best to help old people and to improve education.

Patten's democratic legacy was all around. The crowd argued good-naturedly and laughed or jeered at the dozen candidates. The politicians swapped invective. Grandfathers carrying babies paused at the spectacle. "This style of discussion was brought by Mr Patten," said one grandfather named Chan, unsure whether he liked it or not.

Emily Lau, a popular pro-democracy candidate who has her own Frontier party, said the declining economy was helping those perceived as the opposition to the Tung administration. "People are very much afraid of losing their jobs," she said.

By normal electoral standards, it should add up to a walkover for the Democrats. But victory among the Hong Kong electorate will not translate into a majority for Lee and his allies in the Legislative Council. For 30 of the 60 seats, selection will be made by "functional" electorates of professional groups — lawyers, financiers, teachers and so on. Here companies and tycoons will call the shots.

Ten more seats will be chosen by an "election committee" of 800 worthies, all

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Lee: embarrassment

courtesies by sending flowers. Even the Chinese Communist party's closest allies in Hong Kong are dismayed at Tung's remote, Confucian paternalism. "We are not happy that Mr Tung is not getting in touch with the grassroots and not meeting people in the streets," said Tsang Yok-sing, the territory's most articulate pro-Beijing politician.

"He has spent too much time making overseas trips, which might have been necessary in the first few months, but now he should be concentrating on Hong Kong." By the customarily indirect standards of Chinese political language, this is devastating criticism.

Tsang was organising student riots against the British when Tung was preparing to inherit his father's shipping line. Tsang's party, the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong, follows the classic left-wing line of comradely loyalty to Beijing. But in this month's poll, Tsang is fighting strong odds that, for the third time in a row, he will

Beijing. Only 20 seats are up for election by universal suffrage, of which the Democrats and their allies hope to take about 15. "The system has been rigged," complained Lee, "so that the most popular party will get a quarter of the seats."

That may be true, but even professional pessimists such as Lee acknowledge that when the new legislature meets in July it will mark a quantum jump — the first time since 1949 that a legislative body not completely controlled by the Communist party will carry out its functions on Chinese sovereign soil.

All this might seem mere Chinese municipal politics — except that a few days after the poll, President Clinton is expected to visit Hong Kong on his long-planned tour of China, perhaps the most important trip of his presidency. Protocol demands that Clinton will meet the chief executive for an exchange of courtesies. But politics will require that he also meets Lee, the most popular elected politician. Add to that the presence in town of Jiang Zemin, China's president, and the recipe seems made for some exquisite diplomatic embarrassment.

This prospect alone seems enough to spur on the lonely man handing out leaflets in the polluted dusk on a Hong Kong Friday night.

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