

土地註冊處處長

香港金鐘道 66 號
金鐘道政府合署 28 樓

電話：(852) 2867 8001

圖文傳真：(852) 2810 4561

網站：<http://www.landreg.gov.hk>



LAND REGISTRAR
QUEENSWAY GOVERNMENT OFFICES
28TH FLOOR, 66 QUEENSWAY
HONG KONG
TEL: (852) 2867 8001
FAX: (852) 2810 4561
Website : <http://www.landreg.gov.hk>

14 July 2009

Mr Shea Hing Wan
Chairman
Hong Kong Owners Club Limited
Shops 4 & 5
5 Wing Sing Lane
Yaumatei
Kowloon

Dear Mr Shea,

Consultation on Land Titles (Amendment) Bill

I am writing to thank you for the submission that the Hong Kong Owners Club Limited made in response to the two consultation papers on amendments to the Land Titles Ordinance (LTO). I would like to set out for your information how the Government, after consideration of all submissions, intends to proceed. I have also set out in an annex some responses to particular points or queries raised in your submission.

Conversion Mechanism

The first consultation paper dealt with the question of whether changes were needed to the mechanism under which existing land is to be brought under the LTO. The overwhelming response to the consultation paper was against making any changes to the main conversion mechanism contained in the LTO as enacted in 2004. Under this mechanism, almost all existing eligible land will be brought under the LTO automatically 12 years after commencement of the LTO. The only exceptions would be land against which a caution against conversion had been registered and land for which matters had been submitted for registration before the conversion date and had not yet completed registration. However, there was recognition that the automatic conversion presented some risks. There was general understanding that the

Government should make some changes to better manage these risks, provided that these changes kept to the essential framework of automatic conversion.

The Government has considered whether there are modifications that can be made within the existing automatic conversion mechanism that can deal with the problems that had been identified. It has been concluded that :

- (a) amendments can be made that will clearly manage the priority of interests claimed under caveats; and
- (b) new provisions can be added that allow known cases of indeterminate title to be withheld from conversion while allowing conversion of other land to proceed automatically.

No amendments can be made to the automatic conversion mechanism that remove all uncertainty about what liabilities may arise. However, the Government is of the view that some uncertainty has to be accepted in order to secure the wider public benefit that will come from the certain conversion of existing properties to the new title registration system. Assurance has been given that suitable measures will be put in place to ensure that, if any liabilities are found to have arisen out of the automatic conversion, they will be met in a way that will ensure reasonable stability in fees and charges faced by users of services provided by the Land Registry. The details of these measures are being considered and will be announced in due course.

On this basis, the Government intends to proceed with the Land Titles (Amendment) Bill (LT(A)B) without making any change to the underlying automatic conversion mechanism enacted in 2004. The only changes affecting conversion that will be put forward in the LT(A)B will be amendments to deal with the priority of interests under caveats after conversion and new provisions to withhold certain known problem cases from conversion. On the latter, we will issue a set of proposals for the new provisions for discussion with interested parties before drafting instructions are issued. The measures to handle any liabilities that may be found to arise from automatic conversion will not involve amendments to the LTO.

Rectification and Indemnity

In the second consultation paper, three exceptions to the existing mandatory rectification rule were proposed. These were :

- (a) when the land affected had been surrendered or resumed prior to discovery of the fraud;

- (b) when the land had passed into multiple new ownership; and
- (c) when the current owner was a bona fide purchaser who had not dealt with the fraudster.

On (a), there was general understanding of the need for exception to be made when it was a practical impossibility to return the affected land to the original owner. However, question was raised as to whether this was so in cases where the surrender was not for achieving a public purpose. Also, it was argued that the exception could only be accepted if the limitations on indemnity for a former owner currently laid down in the LTO are removed (these limitations being the cap on the amount of indemnity and the bar to indemnity if the fraud occurred before conversion). Otherwise, the risk that a former owner may be left without full compensation for loss of the property may again arise. It was this risk that the mandatory rectification rule was put forward to address in 2004.

On (b), most respondents questioned whether it was appropriate to make an exception simply because of the land having passed into multiple ownership. It was felt that unless redevelopment had taken place, the former owners should still be allowed to recover the property. As in the case of exception (a) it was argued that it was unacceptable to bar the former owner from recovery in case of redevelopment if the limitations on indemnity were to remain in place.

On (c), most responses were in favour of retaining the rule mandating recovery by the former owner, irrespective of the position of the current registered owner. The Consumer Council and Law Society recognized the arguments in favour of greater protection for purchasers, but tended to favour that the security should be given immediately to a bona-fide purchaser rather than accepting the idea of protection being deferred to the second bona-fide purchaser as proposed in the consultation paper. It was suggested that a 'deferred indefeasibility rule' might be open to abuse. Furthermore, acceptance of the idea of any form of indefeasibility was conditional on the limitations on indemnity for the pre-fraud owner being lifted.

After consideration of the submissions, the Government is now assessing whether it is acceptable – in terms of managing the risks to the planned indemnity fund and the financial impact on property owners who will finance the indemnity fund through a levy on transactions – to remove the limitations on indemnity for a former owner if exceptions to the mandatory rectification rule are made. If it is agreed that the limitations on indemnity can be removed, amendments may then be introduced in the LT(A)B that would allow for exceptions to mandatory rectification :

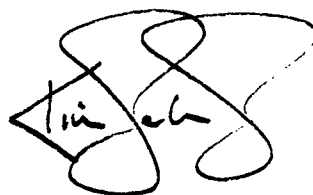
- (a) where land has been surrendered or resumed for a public purpose;
and
- (b) where land had been redeveloped and had then passed into multiple
new ownership.

Next steps

We will first be circulating detailed proposals for new provisions to withhold indeterminate titles from conversion. This will be done shortly with the aim of completing discussion on these by September 2009.

Subject to agreement on the new provision and a decision on whether the limitations on indemnity are to be amended to allow for some exceptions to the mandatory rectification rule, we will then prepare a final working draft of the LT(A)B for review by interested parties. We aim to have this working draft ready by the end of 2009, to allow reasonable time for consideration of the Bill and associated rules before they are put to the Legislative Council for deliberation in the second half of 2010.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K.A. Salkeld', enclosed within a large, stylized, scribbled loop.

(K.A.Salkeld)
Land Registrar

Encl.

Response to particular comments from Hong Kong Owners Club Limited

The covering letter has indicated how the Administration intends to proceed generally with the conversion mechanism and rectification provisions. This supplementary note addresses some particular points raised in your submission.

You have raised particular concern about the lack of awareness among owners as to the impending changes to the registration system. We have taken careful note of your survey. We will stepping up publicity programme to raise the awareness not just of professions but of all property owners in Hong Kong. We may wish to approach you for advice on issues that would be of particular concern to owners to help us in preparing our future publicity programmes.

You asked about the role of solicitors in future under the title registration system. The intention is that conveyancing would still be handled by solicitors. There is a wide range of advice that solicitors are able to give to people engaged in property transactions beyond the questions of title to the property. Furthermore, the involvement of solicitors in verifying the identity of parties to transactions, their authority to act, and the proper execution of documents contributes to the overall security and integrity of property transactions. Under the Land Titles Ordinance, in future all applications for registration of the transactions will have to be verified by a solicitor.

With respect to the role of estate agents, the title registration system will not make any changes. Estate agents will continue to play the same role as at present.

In response to your question about the protection of purchasers and all vendors under the new system, we would like to point out that a purchaser cannot register himself as the owner after he has entered into a provisional agreement for sale and purchase and has made a provisional deposit payment for a property. A purchaser can only become the registered owner when an instrument of transfer in his favour has been executed by the vendor and application for registration has been made to the Land Registrar. The vendor will therefore be in a position to ensure that he will get the sale proceeds before he executes the instrument of transfer.