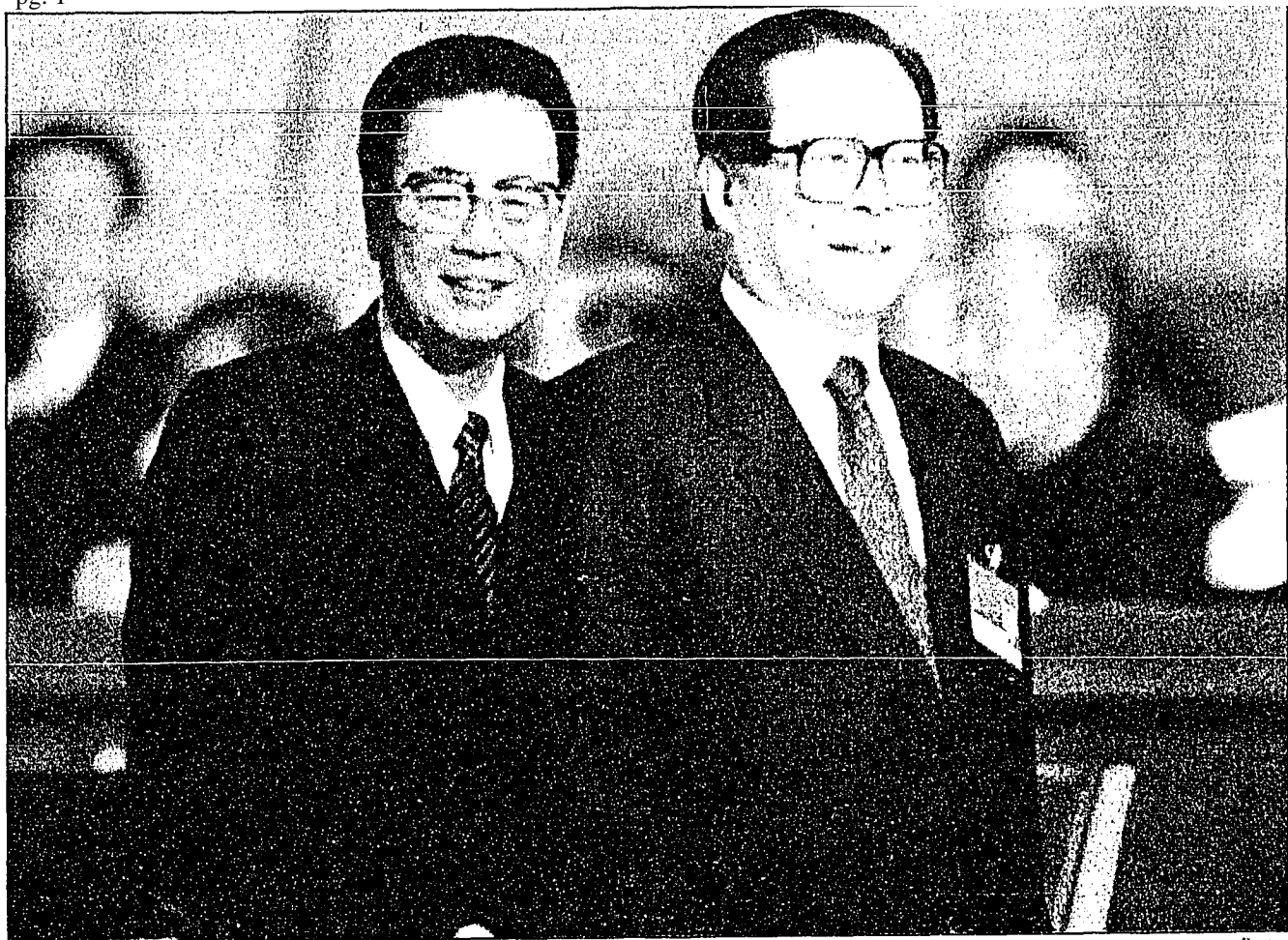


Li lets the side down with Freudian slip
By GEOFFREY CROTHALL in Beijing
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Reuters

Party men . . . Prime Minister Li Peng and President Jiang Zemin take their places in the Great Hall of the People for the NPC session.

Li lets the side down with Freudian slip

By GEOFFREY CROTHALL
in Beijing

AFTER being word perfect for the first hour of his opening address to the National People's Congress (NPC) yesterday, premier Li Peng, slipped up in a way that would make even former United States president Ronald Reagan cringe.

Referring to the breakdown of Sino-British talks on the political future of Hong Kong, Mr Li told a packed audience in the Great Hall of the People that responsibility for the failure of the talks must be borne by the "Chinese side".

A visibly embarrassed Mr Li quickly corrected his mistake, broadcast live on national televi-

sion, to fix the blame on the "British side", but by then the damage had been done.

Asked about the gaffe in Mr Li's script, well known actor and NPC deputy Ying Ruocheng smiled and said: "Well, he is not a trained actor."

British Ambassador Sir Robin McLaren, who was also in the gallery for the speech, suggested the *faux pas* might have been a "little Freudian slip".

Another British diplomat said jokingly that the Chinese Government had admitted the truth at last, but as usual changed its mind almost right away.

Most of the nearly 3,000 deputies in the Great Hall chose to ig-

nore the slip-up and broke into thunderous applause a little later when Mr Li announced that China was "determined and able to resume the sovereignty of Hong Kong".

"British colonial rule in Hong Kong is coming to an end. No force can stop that," he added with a flourish.

The section on Hong Kong was undoubtedly the highlight of Mr Li's 90-minute address, which was otherwise devoid of interest.

Rhetoric and ideology were also missing this year, with Marxism, socialism and Mao Zedong Thought only getting a fleeting mention.

Even the "chief architect of reform", Deng Xiaoping, whose

name is usually evoked at every possible opportunity, was mentioned only four times.

Unlike his colleague, President Jiang Zemin, who regularly plays to the gallery during important speeches, Mr Li read through the work report in a bland, at times barely audible monotone, ignoring most of the cues for applause.

It took the mention of communist heroes Lei Feng and Xu Hong-gang an hour into the speech to stir the rows of deputies into clapping.

The rest of the time they sat, seemingly bored, with their arms crossed, or hands clasped on the bench in front of them.

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