

A Retired Citizen 2009.9.1

I am very pessimistic about Hong Kong's future. Just look around and you'll see right under your nose the blunders committed time and again by various government departments, the shameless clamours of some officials for higher pay scales while doing much the same job with the same perfunctory attitude, (now the public doctors are joining in, and soon, I can assure you, the nurses, the social workers and even the teachers, and possibly lecturers and professors, fanned by their Legco representatives and the media, will follow suit), and the insatiable business magnates and real estate tycoons (I don't blame the small proprietors) marking up prices and rents, trying to squeeze every penny out of HK (nominally to satisfy their public shareholders but actually themselves). This is selfishness! This is irresponsibility! And unfortunately this is rampant! And of course you know why. The government is weak and incompetent and many rich and powerful stakeholders take full advantage of this weakness and the government leaders for selfish reasons are afraid of them.

The above manifestations of a decline and fall (as of Rome) are worrying enough, unless one is totally unaware or insensitive to impending crises, or one is too drunk with HK's past glory (=not sustainable) and present seeming and fleeting success (=not sustainable), or one is fishing in troubled waters. Worse still, there is greater underlying danger that forebodes the demise of HK: while the present generation is decadent, our future generation(s) is simply not equipped for survival (let alone sustainable growth) because our present leaders are either too dumb and blind or too selfish and heartless to provide the appropriate upbringing and sustainable environment (economic, social, cultural, political, etc.) for them to acquire the basic all-round survival skills and attitudes. When there is no future, why talk about the future, something non-existent? (Refer to one speaker's insight into the plight of those below 30 and those above 60)

But I am stuck in HK and I must think about her future which is also mine. Hence, I hoped to learn in your seminar about what diagnosis, prognosis and advice on the direction of sustainable development HK might take from your knowledgeable speakers who are professionals, experts and scholars (and leaders of society).

I expected the talk, as the topic suggests quite clearly, to give examples of the *rise* and *fall* of some big cities, past and present, so that we can *compare* HK with them (as if looking into a mirror) in terms of their strengths and weaknesses and the reasons for their success and failure, on different levels (and not merely GDP figures which our leaders like to emphasize so much). Only through such comparison and analysis of the favourable and unfavourable factors may we have a clearer picture of

what dangers lurk and what strengths we still possess for sustainable development. However, this analysis was absent in the seminar.

The future of any big city is no funny joke in a social gathering for the unwary masses or for the complacent and self-seeking *leaders*. If they can't tell me what goes wrong or try to sweep the gloom under the carpet, let me tell them instead that all the strengths, advantages and superiority of HK have gone! Don't dream that we are the hub of this or we are going to 'forge' HK into a centre of that. The naked truth is we have no geographical, political, economic, social, environmental and knowledge and skill bases (let alone advantages) and preconditions for becoming the centre of anything, as our leaders are weak and halfhearted and our people are squabbling and clamorous. Moreover, under globalisation and 'northernisation' we are marginalized and a mere underling of our motherland, especially when we still don't wake up from our dream or complacency.

Revolutions come from below upwards. But the sensible, rational handling of a crisis or a rescue operation comes *from above with good leadership* and coordination (which means good governance). I like to use the word 'leader' in the broadest sense here to include all those (usually all adults like you and me) who have the power, means and position to lead, in whatever social unit or group, big or small, and in whichever field of activity, high or low level. For instance, in the family as a social unit, the leaders are the parents or guardians; in the school it means the principal and in the class the teacher. It is axiomatic that the person-in-charge of an office, big or small, the professors and scholars in an academic setting, the head of a government department, the CEO of an enterprise, the governor of a city, all the elite of society are all *leaders* due to their **roles**. These people, unless they are physically or mentally handicapped, are charged with the *intrinsic instinctive moral responsibility* for leading and guiding those less able below them, just because they are advantaged or privileged in their own circles in many ways: in terms of their authoritative position, their knowledge, skill and experience, their sagacity and sensitivity to crisis, challenges and changes, the exclusive means and resources they possess such as money, material wealth and social network. Just take the smallest unit of the family as an example again: the parents are naturally the leaders with more rights and heavier duties because they are supposed to make the best selfless decisions for the good of their children with the material and non-material resources they own. Unfortunately, this assumption often proves wrong in real life, and even more unfortunately many leaders of bigger groups like government departments fail to fulfil their natural, and *paid*, duties. So, even well-intentioned and well-thought-out projects and policies are spoilt when they are carried out

halfheartedly. Poor leadership often results in poor governance and more social grievances, and this is something we must **rectify** if we want policies to be successful and HK to be prosperous and sustainable.

If your seminar didn't give me the answers, let me, despite my lack of knowledge and understanding as a layman, take the liberty to suggest some simplified, superficial and loose ideas out of sheer imagination (which is better than having no ideas from experts at all 禮失求諸野!).

1. Lousy governance

- I cannot resist putting the blame on the SAR Government. I know it is hemmed in between various powerful forces. But *if* the leaders are clever enough, they can steer clear of mainland pressure as well as public opposition. However, they are either half-hearted or they lack the sagacity and ability required of any good leader. So the whole civil service is running out of control. The underdogs protest, the opportunists high up wield their power and hunt for more advantages. This, I suppose, is 'collusion and corruption' HK-style, which we readily excuse for being better than that in other backward countries.
- Tell the officials to study modern management and improve their leadership skills and attitudes. They should learn to lead, convince, move their subordinates with reasoning, empathy and genuine concern, and have the guts or moral conviction to be firm about agreed and justified decisions. On the other hand, let the elite tell the government *not to be afraid* and that they, as leaders of society, will lead the society (us) to support it.

2. Environment

- Though HK professes to be Asia's 'world city', her living environment leaves much to be desired. It is obvious that there is little sense of belonging when investors and many other people treat HK as a place for making money only and not a place for living. You can ask our leaders, or even yourself and me, whether they would like to live or stay in HK as much as possible or rather enjoy living elsewhere whenever possible after they have grabbed enough money or retired. Economic success and glamorous material life are not enough to make HK attractive to them.
- Urge the government to carry out the collection of recyclable materials and encourage the recycling industries, with tax incentives, lower land prices and

speedier processing of applications which originally might last years. (The sites for the recycling plants should be small and scattered over different districts to avoid resistance from residents of those districts.)

- No more delays to legislation on the compulsory collection of disused electrical appliances and batteries of all kinds by the manufacturers.
- Use punitive or regulatory measures, like the levy on plastic bags and the fines on smoking, etc., to pursue the principle of 'polluters pay'. This can be extended to cover the glaring lights after 11 pm and excessive packaging. The registration fee for high-energy consumption vehicles should be sharply increased and battery cars (such as those developed by the Polytechnic University) should be introduced as quickly as possible. (I heard the irony that other countries have placed bigger orders on our electric cars than we ourselves!) More environmentally-friendly public transport systems like the trains and trams should be extended or constructed as major infrastructural projects.
- Don't allow the lands, buildings, environmental hygiene and related departments to shift their responsibilities to one another. Instead, make them establish closer coordination and cooperation against all forms of environmental pollution and public hygiene problem. They should closely monitor the construction of all buildings in respect of proper land use, adequate open public space (and street space), preservation of trees, rooftop planting and environmentally-friendly design, making these *mandatory* in property development (at the expense of the income of the real estate developers of course! without worrying about how they recover the cost from their buyers).
- I hope the government can spare the disused Central Market in Central and develop it into a lung of the crowded district. Or at least the new building(s) must be low-rise (10-storeyed shopping mall or the like at most) with open space around it and its roof carpeted with greenery. (Nobody seems to voice their concern over this.) I suppose it is better to lose a few billion dollars by not auctioning it than to waste that money on other misdirected expenses. A big proportion of this money can actually be recovered if the government auctions other land in the NT for luxurious flats because from the present craze for such flats even in remote NT, we know that property developers have shifted their greedy attention there. You don't have to worry about their income and their shareholders' dividends. They can sell NT flats at as high a price as urban land without affecting the buyers much since the latter can well afford it and many are from the mainland who prefer the cleaner environment of the NT and don't need a flat in Central!

3. Housing

▪ You must have heard recently that the rent for a room in an old tenement building is higher than that of a modern apartment (at \$35/sf). HK's overall economy, let alone personal finance, has long been victim to high land prices and rents. The rectification of this has long been overdue. It was a serious mistake to give in to the house-owners (actually mainly the rich property developers and speculators) by stupidly cancelling the '85,000 public flats' concept. Nobody asked for 85,000 units, but few people benefit when the provision of public flats is suspended altogether. Can't the government be flexible enough to provide say 8,500 flats instead of none or too many every year?

4. Economy

▪ Our rule of law (though actually waning, considering the vested interest of the privileged group of law makers and dispensers and the growing social injustice), monetary stability (so long as RMB is not freely exchanged), our open market (also our vulnerability), our outstanding human resources with educated and efficient professionals (though diluted by the growing number of old people and immigrants and a weak new generation, and which will end after *your* generation) are the only important advantages we can still, and must, hold on to before they soon disappear. 'Positive non-intervention', as I see it, is to provide the suitable environment for free economic development, based on the above strengths, with government guidance and encouragement but without its clumsy interventions.

▪ However, closer government supervision and stricter control are also necessary to discourage speculation and market-rigging for economic bubbles and better-looking statistics. There is no fear of inhibiting investment if our rules and laws are *fair* and *consistent*.

▪ We have to take heed of globalization instead of jumping on its bandwagon and keep a balance between the big enterprises and the SMEs. The monopolies by big corporations have squeezed out many small (traditional) businesses. Don't be fooled by the speculators (most of the local and foreign 'crocodiles') whom we naively believe to bring investment money. Their funds are sweeteners and if we crave after them, history tells us we are drinking hemlock to quench our thirst.

▪ Don't be too excited when conglomerates and monopolies (who are not philanthropists) invest here. They are the enemies of economic diversification (think of the concept of biodiversity and you will understand the dangers of economic homogeneity). Let me say 'smaller is smarter' in a post-industrial society if we are

humane enough not to *eliminate* those who can't *transform* themselves! If we want to make HK's economy sustainable, we should not help the big corporations marginalize the small ones (however much we thirst for their investment), *unless* we want to turn HK into a place where people just work to earn money while they live elsewhere back in Shenzhen. (Or why not? HK can become a mega financial *district* which excludes those who call her their *home*, and then she can truly be a financial *centre*!)

5. Government revenue

- A narrow tax base means inadequate revenue for our infrastructural and social projects. To do something reasonable and affordable though unwelcoming, we can raise the tax with moderation to a point we won't be out-competed by other low-tax cities. I don't believe investors will leave HK just because we raise the tax to a previous level of say 17.5% or 18% (please check the exact figure), that is if we maintain our other aspects of superiority and attraction.
- Even a low and progressive sales tax (say from 2% to 50%) is acceptable, of course with the basic daily necessities like daily foodstuff (not good food and wines) and clothing (as opposed to fashion) exempted. High-class recreational outfit (e.g. exclusive cameras, audiovisual equipment, 3G phones) and other luxury items should be subject to some kind of progressive taxation (like luxury car registration fee). This can indirectly encourage people to consume less and *waste* less. You may say this will make HK lose her 'glamour and glitter'. It does, if we impose the various taxes all at one go, or exact a flat rate, which is not my point. After some time, people will get used to it and the rich will continue feasting on shark's fins, abalone and truffles to their extinction.
- By the same token, investment taxes should be considered. China imposes a 10% tax on (bank) interests, which we also did many years ago (please check the exact years), and taxes on properties for investment. Why not we? We can keep them as low as 5% or even 3%, and again we can apply the progressive tax system. As our stock exchange is in some way no different from casinos in Macau, a 'gambling' tax should be levied. Make it 'low' to retain 'investment'.

6. Education

- Tell the ED not to reform merely for the sake of reform. The teaching medium issue is a quagmire and a farce, enough to show the danger of too much government intervention in the first place (a decade ago). Now the belated 'fine-tuning' shows nothing but that the government is backing out *without* solving the problems it

causes. Non-intervention, as opposed to deregulation and absence of discipline, should be upheld. Too many policy changes have strained our educational resources and diverted our attention from the nurturing of the young.

- The public, and the educationists themselves, should understand clearly the difference between learning and taking exams. This requires a fundamental change of mindset and better coordination between the ED and the Exam Authority. Recently, I was shocked to hear that the EA ruled out the ED's original idea of allowing students the flexibility to *give answers in both languages* in the new Liberal Studies Paper, without considering the real purpose of introducing the subject and its need for flexibility of expression. This and other problems involved in the teaching and learning of this subject just accentuate the language medium controversy, which adults (educators, parents and prospective employers) greet with heated debate while evading the heart of the problem.

- By the way, one more word about the teaching medium: tell the parents and the EMI school leaders to think more deeply without pretence how far HK has the right conditions* nowadays for teaching and learning or using English to warrant their insistence on using English to teach abstract subjects. (*Note that foreign investors who prey on HK are more fluent in Putonghua than we, and that even RTHK English channels often broadcast in Putonghua or Cantonese.)

- The parents and guardians must be *re-educated* before we can expect our young people to be educated and civilized citizens. There should be more and compulsory courses on parenting, and the schools' PTAs should be charged with this duty rather than with organizing social gatherings.

7. Creative industries

- They should be allowed to evolve in their *diversified* forms with government support rather than artificially forged (I hate the Chinese term 打造). Creativity is inspired and acquired through knowledge and experience and not artificially constructed. Let creativity develop where its root lies and not plant it in Western Kowloon when we know at heart how often we lack the software for the hardware which will lie wasted. If we don't nurture the young in the arts at school, forget about creativity which often deteriorates into mimicry.

- Shed our pretence of supporting the creative industries while we refuse to help the production and marketing of many local inventions (e.g. from the Poly U, from our young inventors, etc.) which are equally creative (and practical, too).

8. Wealth gap and poverty

- Referring to Point 4 above on Economy, I would focus on one cause of the wealth gap: when there is no economic diversity there is no room in a metropolis for the small and the weak who can't transform themselves in the fierce competition generated by the business giants. This is how poverty, including intergenerational poverty, arises when the disadvantaged get more disadvantages and are gradually weeded out. To break this vicious circle, the marginally poor should be given more protection in constructive ways before they fall into the CSSA net.
- The government must play its proper role to redistribute wealth and should no longer please and favour the big businesses with the excuse of keeping them. After all, there are many ways to attract investment if government policies are fair and firm.
- The government should encourage the establishment of social enterprises (if the private enterprises refuse to shoulder their social responsibility) to prove that wealth can be generated without exploitation of the employees who can become shareholders.
- Similarly, small businesses should be given adequate support to thrive, because they can accommodate those less equipped for modern cutthroat competition. This also contributes to economic diversity which is so essential to HK's sustainable development.

Let me make an appeal to the leaders of our society (bureaucrats, councillors, professionals, tycoons, scholars, the elite, etc., like you), and leaders of the families and social groups (like you and me): lead your subordinates and your wards (citizens and the less able and less educated stakeholders) conscientiously, out of your generous natural sense of responsibility and out of (y)our selfish need for (y)our own self-preservation in a time of impending but unheeded crisis in our city.

Don't talk hypocritically about 'core values' which we ourselves barely understand. Just ask ourselves two simple questions: are we happy with the present life in HK and what kind of HK (and by the same token, a world) do we want to bequeath to our children if we love them at all? Those who don't belong to HK or those who have already in their will left a bejeweled lifeboat and an escape route for their children need not answer these questions.