

Why Hong Kong must consult Beijing

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According to Hong Kong University's public opinion programme, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's popularity rating has risen slightly, from 42.9 to 44.6, following his policy address, which cannot be described as an exciting speech with many new aspirations. However, it did touch on certain important issues regarding constitutional reform, the recovering economy, education and some aspects of improving governance.

Mr Tung announced the setting up of a taskforce, headed by Chief Secretary Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, to examine constitutional development, particularly those issues which pertain to relevant provisions in the Basic Law, and to consult the central government. Those who believe that the July 1 and January 1 marches were about being able to choose through universal suffrage the chief executive by 2007 and the entire legislature by 2008 must be disappointed or even furious with the decision.

On the other hand, not many practically minded Hong Kong people I have come across expected Mr Tung to come up with a definite timetable on universal suffrage at this stage.

Being an integral part of China, Hong Kong's constitutional development comes within the provisions laid down in the Basic Law. All appointments of principal officials and also the way the chief executive is appointed are clearly spelt out. Any changes, including the introduction of universal suffrage, cannot be implemented without Beijing's approval. Therefore, the central government's opinion should be respected.

In my opinion, Beijing's view is as important as that of the public and the Hong Kong government. Let us not forget that Hong Kong cannot go along the route towards independence, a proposal that has no support within the community at large. All along, the people have supported the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law in achieving long-term stability and prosperity.

As I see it, setting up the taskforce is a sensible and practical approach in dealing with this important issue, particularly when its members are local and are generally known as having a great commitment to the special administrative region.



To equate constitutional reform merely to being able to choose the chief executive and the legislature through universal suffrage is wrong and perhaps over-simplifying the issue. Constitutional development touches a wide range of subjects; the relationship between the executive and the legislature, the role played by political parties, the accountability system and civil servants, to name just a few. The election system for choosing the chief executive and the legislature forms merely a part (although a very important one) of our constitutional development. In view of the complicated nature and wide range of subjects that need to be dealt with, while supporting the setting up of the taskforce, I strongly recommend that the consultation exercise be conducted systematically, involving all sectors of the community, as soon as possible. Therefore, I welcome Mr Tsang's suggestion that the taskforce adopt a two-pronged approach and consult simultaneously with Beijing and the Hong Kong community.

In his policy address, Mr Tung described Hong Kong as being well placed to further develop as an international services and asset management centre, like Switzerland. This is a very interesting and constructive proposal, as Hong Kong is already a banking and financial centre. Looking at the high value-added services provided by Switzerland in corporate investment, personal banking, insurance and financial services is definitely a step in the right direction.

During a business trip to Geneva a few years ago, I noticed that prices appeared much higher than in neighbouring France. Yet, despite the relatively high cost of living, Switzerland remains famous not only for private banking and financial services, but also for high-quality manufacturing, hotel management and tourism services. It can achieve this because it produces high-quality products and services that the world is prepared to buy - even at a higher price.

Instead of spending money on projects like Harbour Fest, Hong Kong should conduct serious studies to find out exactly why Switzerland is so successful and how we can learn from it.

I wish to touch on two other points here. Mr Tung talked about developing education and health care to attract foreign nationals who could make use of Hong Kong's high-quality professional services at commercial rates. Two years ago, the New Century Forum put forward proposals on this very subject. The government should quickly work towards implementing these plans, rather than just conducting further studies.



Mr Tung also talked of quickening the decision-making process and simplifying procedures to speed up infrastructure works and other developments. This is very noble, but the public wants the government to fulfill its previous promises and commitments, instead of merely repeating the old ones.

(Originally published on 13th January 2004, in South China Morning Post.)