

## Now for some soul

DAVID LAN ( 27-11-2003 )

A historic event; that is how the District Council elections have been described. More than one million people cast their votes, the highest turnout - 44 per cent - ever recorded in Hong Kong. This is despite the fact that the government's publicity campaign was not increased in the current climate of fiscal prudence. Furthermore, the district councils' advisory role has always been criticised for being insignificant and lacking real power.

Another phenomenal change which took place is the importance placed on whether a candidate belongs to a particular group or camp. The issue of party politics varies in significance in elections generally, but at the district council level, more emphasis is usually placed on whether a candidate has a good history and reputable track record, while his or her political alliance may be of secondary importance. On this occasion, however, much emphasis was placed on whether a candidate was affiliated to a pro-government or pro-establishment group. If they were, it had a negative impact on their chances.

Commentators, politicians, officials and the public have said this phenomenon is due to the effect of the protests on July 1. Following the demonstration, the Hong Kong government said it had heard the people's voice and would respond.

Since then, there have been a number of initiatives from the central government, working with the Hong Kong administration, for example: the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement; removing restrictions on mainlanders coming to Hong Kong as individual tourists; the proposed reduction in the price of water from the Eastern Pearl River; and the speeding up of the planned bridge to Zhuhai and Macau.

These new policies promise to improve Hong Kong's economy, which has experienced a gradual bottoming out and a steady recovery. As a result, the overall mood has improved significantly, while the central government's standing in the eyes of the Hong Kong public - always high since the 1997 handover - has risen. Yet somehow this feel-good factor has not filtered down to the Tung administration.

As I see it, the feelings of discontent and anger from July 1 were transferred - by skilful planning or perhaps by sheer chance - to the ballot box, where people cast their votes for the political parties or groups that openly opposed the special administrative

region's government.

Recent events, such as the Equal Opportunities Commission saga and the Harbour Fest (most citizens still cannot understand why \$100 million from the public purse should be spent on a music festival) might have reignited some people's discontent towards the administration.

This could explain why Long Hair Leung Kwok-hung - backed by The Frontier but with practically no history of district work nor any track record - could gain 1,149 votes. But for a third party, who took 636 votes, he could have beaten Democratic Alliance for Betterment of Hong Kong heavyweight Choi So Yuk, who took the Kam Ping constituency with 1,433 votes.

It might also explain why DAB vice-chairman Ip Kwok-him (with more than 10 years' solid district work) lost to the relative newcomer to the Kwun Lung constituency, Cyd Ho Sau-lan, albeit by a mere 64 votes. Similarly, DAB legislators Yeung Yiu-chung and Lau Kwong-wah, and many other so-called pro-establishment or pro-Beijing candidates with good track records, lost to those with less experience, but who belonged to anti-SAR government parties and groups.

Now that the battle is over, I believe everyone will be looking back to see what they can learn from the elections. The SAR government should also be doing some careful soul-searching to discover why pro-establishment political parties, groups and individuals had such a difficult time.

Why do people gain so much credit merely by giving the thumbs down to the SAR government? Are its basic policies wrong? Has it forgotten to look carefully before leaping into the dark? Why are Hong Kong people so unhappy that they choose not to support candidates who show sympathy towards the administration? What could the government do to relieve people's grievances?

No doubt, there are many more questions the government needs to ask. And it needs to find the right answers quickly - hopefully well before next year's Legislative Council elections.

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