

Dear Mrs. Lam,

Well, though it was little more than a year ago, it seems long ago that you so kindly gave Rosh a lunchtime talk at the China Club. You have been so busy since then; and so have I!

I am starting a regular comment column in the C.D. I hope that any points made there will be constructive.

With that in mind, may I draw your kind attention to the positive suggestions made in the enclosed 7/11 C.D. article?

Would you please arrange for the appropriate policy bureaux to consider the concrete proposals made therein?

I hope that, if taken up,

2

they may help Hong Kong to solve this  
problem or a deciding (relative) birth rate.

Thank you, and good luck and  
best wishes for all that you undertake.

Yours sincerely,  
Paul Surzeer.

PAUL SURTEES

CHINA DAILY 7/11/2013

# Combat declining birthrate or face the economic consequences

In many advanced economies of the world, and especially in Western Europe, they are facing the established fact that the population is aging, meaning that the proportion of older people to younger people is growing. In states with government-financed pension schemes, that means there soon will not be enough current workers paying into the state coffers to cover the pensions of those many who have retired from work. With people these days living much longer, this problem can only get worse.



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By some estimates, and if things here continue along the same lines as currently, fully a third of Hong Kong's population will be aged over 65 by 2043. There are many factors leading to the declining relative birth rate in Hong Kong, and the much longer life-span at the other end of the scale

must also be factored in. Hong Kong's city finances are not yet used to provide public pensions — these are taken care of, if at all, equitably, by employers and the employees themselves, under the Mandatory Provident Fund scheme. But still, Hong Kong faces the problem of a declining birthrate.

A couple of generations ago, local Chinese people commonly had big families — they wanted lots of children. In those days, sadly, not all lived to adulthood. But with vast improvements to public health, nowadays almost all babies born in Hong Kong are expected to live a full life. For that reason alone, young couples are less likely to desire a large number of children.

But there are many other factors limiting the desire to have many (or any) children in Hong Kong. Firstly, with almost all newly-wedded couples, both have demanding full-time jobs. That generally would continue, after the birth of a child. The minimal level of maternity and paternity support available from Hong Kong employers is not

just enough to make child-raising an easy option for employers.

Then there are Hong Kong's well-established housing problems. For newly-wedded couples can scrape together enough money to be able to start out on their residential life by buying a home of their own. Therefore, they often have to make do with staying in a parental home, hardly much encouragement for them to want to start a family of their own. And then, with over 200,000 on the public housing waiting list, a new take many years before they can get even a small flat of their own.

There is a trend for Hong Kong people in these days to marry closer to 30 than to 20, as used to be the case. That limits the extent of the child-rearing years, especially if they have to wait a decade and more before getting their own home, and thereby having the space to think about having a family.

The necessary steps to help reverse this trend towards minimal numbers of babies being born in Hong Kong parents will not

be easy or inexpensive, to achieve. But if they are not taken, the aging of Hong Kong's population will increase exponentially, with serious economic consequences.

For a start, government-subsidized schemes need to be introduced at the workplace, to make having a job and a child at the same time a much easier option. Offering government-subsidized and government-near-deadly maternity leave, maternity and notably more generous maternity and paternity leave would help. Having part-time work, or flexitime, a legal right for the mother, before the child reaches school age, is another pressing need. Another is for mothers to be afforded time off, on unpaid leave, during those periods when their child no longer needs them at home — throughout the long school holidays.

As part of a clearly much-needed greater effort on the part of the Hong Kong government, to make much more, and much better, public housing available to its citizens, newly-married couples need to be given priority in obtaining a home of their own.

The provision of very generous child benefits, payments, support with private school fees and many other similar examples of financial support from Hong Kong's overbearing public coffers would all do much to encourage Hong Kong's young people to have children.

After all, isn't it a Confucian ideal (literally we go!) that "everything under Heaven is for the people"? Holding over large financial reserves, as the city of Hong Kong does, cannot be an end in itself. Hong Kong's money should be spent on Hong Kong people, including encouraging the birth of many more generations of Hong Kong babies.

The author first came to Hong Kong in 1996, having previously worked in Beijing and 30 other countries. His articles have appeared in publications all over the world. He was founding president of the Hong Kong branch of the non-profit-making Commonwealth NGO, the Royal Overseas League, which seeks to encourage international understanding and supports a variety of Hong Kong charities.

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## Combat declining birthrate or face the economic consequences

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By Paul Surtees (HK Edition)

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In many advanced economies of the world, and especially in Western Europe, they are facing the established fact that the population is aging: meaning that the proportion of older people to younger people is growing. In states with government-financed pension schemes, that means there soon will not be enough current workers paying into the state coffers, to cover the pensions of those many who have retired from work. With people these days living much longer, this problem can only get worse.

By some estimates, and if things here continue along the same lines as currently, fully a third of Hong Kong's population will be aged over 65 by 2043. There are many factors leading to the declining relative birthrate in Hong Kong, and the much longer life-spans at the other end of the scale must also be factored in. Hong Kong's city finances are not yet used to provide public pensions - these are taken care of, if inadequately, by employers and the employees themselves, under the Mandatory Provident Fund scheme. But still, Hong Kong faces the problem of a declining birthrate.

A couple of generations ago, local Chinese people commonly had big families - they wanted lots of children. In those days, sadly, not all lived to adulthood. But with vast improvements to public health, nowadays almost all babies born in Hong Kong may be expected to live a full life. For that reason alone, young couples are less likely to desire a large number of children.

But there are many other factors limiting the desire to have many (or any) children in Hong Kong. Firstly, with almost all newly-wedded couples, both have demanding full-time jobs. That generally would continue, after the birth of a child. The minimal level of maternity and paternity support available from Hong Kong employers is not yet enough to make child-raising an easy option for employees.

Then there are Hong Kong's well-established housing problems. Few newly-married couples can scrape together enough money to be able to start out on their married life by buying a home of their own. Therefore, they often have to make do with staying in a parental home; hardly much encouragement for them to want to start a family of their own. And then, with over 200,000 on the public housing waiting list, it may take many years before they can get even a small flat of their own.

There is a trend for Hong Kong people in these days to marry closer to 30, than to 20, as used to be the case. That limits the extent of the childbearing years, especially if they have to wait a decade and more before getting their own home, and thereby having the space to think about having a family.

The necessary steps to help reverse this trend towards minimal numbers of babies being born to Hong Kong parents will not be easy, or inexpensive, to achieve. But if they are not taken, the aging of Hong Kong's population will increase apace, with serious economic consequences.

For a start, government-subsidized schemes need to be introduced at the workplace, to make having a job and a child at the same time a much easier option. Offering (government-supported and government-mandated) notably more generous maternity and paternity leave would help. Having part-time work, or flexitime, a legal right for the mother, before the child reaches school age, is another pressing need. Another is for mothers to be afforded time off, on unpaid leave, during those periods when their children most need them at home - throughout the long school holidays.



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The provision of very generous child benefit payments, support with private school fees and many other similar examples of financial support from Hong Kong's overflowing public coffers would all do much to encourage Hong Kong's young people to have children.

After all, isn't it a Confucian ideal (tian xia wei gong) that "everything under Heaven is for the people." Holding over-large financial reserves, as the city of Hong Kong does, cannot be an end in itself: Hong Kong's money should be spent on Hong Kong people, including encouraging the birth of many more generations of Hong Kong babies.

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(HK Edition 11/07/2013 page1)

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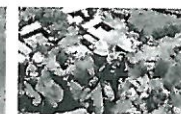
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