

Chief Secretary for Administration's Office

主旨: CS part of a blinkered, stubborn and backward-looking bureaucracy

Chairing the Steering Committee on Population Policy, the Chief Secretary for Administration Carrie Lam put forward a consultation document that at least shows she is very much a part of the blinkered stubborn and backward-looking bureaucracy.

There was a time when Carrie Lam struck me as an outspoken, capable civil servant having some sense of mission and having at heart struggling Hong Kongers' interests, who readily outshone the coterie of mediocre and self-serving top-ranking bureaucrats. My confidence in her started to wane, though, when she pushed through LegCo the amendment to the Land (Compulsory Sale for Development) Ordinance, lowering the triggering threshold from 90% to 80% of units in the building in question, which effectively makes it easier for developers to encroach on private property rights in the name of urban redevelopment. Public opinion that showed strong opposition to the amendment bill was simply ignored. I began to harbor doubt about Lam's true colors, but was still willing to believe that she was probably overpowered by her boss who was always all ears towards the powerful property oligarchs.

Hong Kong society has been screaming for some sort of population control, which indeed, judging from all kinds of prevalent social problems ranging from (lack of) housing to (poor) quality of education, inadequate medical care, and fast-declining quality of life, seems well justified. When society is plagued by overcrowding from the individual travel scheme, by a general lack of decent living space and a host of other unresolved issues, daily life pressure has already been building up to a boiling point. Then this Steering Committee went and poured oil on fire by saying that Hong Kong needs to squeeze in yet more people, just for the sake of pandering to the business sector by importing more labor (apparently so as to keep wages down). The document shows at every turn that the administration is still saddled with the outdated mindset that economic growth is overridingly more exigent than anything else, including but not limited to, decent and affordable living space for everyone, a more level playing field for all entrepreneurs, a cleaner environment and a narrower wealth gap.

Setting vacuous objectives for a population policy without having regard to urgent social issues will not help anyone, because those objectives would only sound totally irrelevant.

Why is the Committee not more concerned with quality of citizens, quality of life, quality of living space and quality of environment, which should all weigh far more than business growth, in its deliberations about a sustainable population policy? Why hasn't it occurred to Committee members that in an already well developed economy like Hong Kong's, quality of growth and quality of labor is perhaps much more important than quantity? To achieve some improvement in the quality of life for the existing population, is placing a cap on population growth, when there's already an acute shortage of land and housing, such a bad thing after all?

Has the Committee ever asked the questions why young couples in Hong Kong are less and less willing to have babies and why more and more foreign-passport-holding families are thinking of returning to their adopting countries? To panic over a shrinking working population and to blindly recommend import of labor will do nothing but exacerbate existing problems. Is it not obvious to the Committee that those problems include, but are not limited to, a chronic lack of affordable housing, a lousy education system, an over-concentrated economy, limited upward social mobility for young workers and a rotting environment? Economic growth is not a panacea and in fact slower growth couldn't hurt and could even be helpful in letting society have the chance to fix its more urgent problems. Hong Kong's GDP per capita is already on a

par with most economically advanced countries. It is certainly rich enough to do a lot more for the aging population (mostly taxpayers in their younger days who contributed much to Hong Kong's prosperity) and for the less privileged.

The administration has to set its priorities straight. The Steering Committee on Population Policy needs to treat people as human beings rather than robotic units of production.