

Qualities of Political Leaders

Tsang Yok Sing

President of the Legislative Council, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

(Following is the speech by the President of Legislative Council, Mr. Tsang Yok Sing, delivered at the AGM and Luncheon of the Hong Kong Public Administration Association, held in the Police Officers' Club on 9 June, 2014. The original was delivered in Chinese.)

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen,

Our society seems to have a deep-rooted aversion to politics. This was epitomized by an appeal made by our first Chief Executive Mr. C.H. Tung at the founding of the Hong Kong SAR, calling on everybody to "stop playing politics and start doing real work". Hong Kong people must have grown tired of the persistent political disputes throughout the pre-handover years, thought Mr. Tung, so now that the disputes were over, we would be able to concentrate ourselves on doing useful things. He soon discovered things did not happen the way he wished.

More recently, we often hear people lamenting a phenomenon of "pan-politicization", that is, a tendency of turning every livelihood or economic issue into politics, making it impossible to resolve. But let us pause and think for a moment. Can there be "purely" livelihood and economic issues? Is there any public policy issue that is free from politics?

Take for example housing, which everyone from the Chief Executive to ordinary citizens would place at the top of their priority list of livelihood issues. To increase housing supply we need to build more residential units, and we need land to build them on. All kinds of political problems will be encountered in seeking land for development. No matter in what way the government tries to acquire new land --- by reclamation, by carving out parts of our country parks, or by turning into building sites the precious few open spaces still left in developed areas --- there are bound to be objections, and dealing with these objections is a political task.

Similarly, other livelihood issues like poverty alleviation, public health services and care for the elderly, can hardly be discussed in isolation from politics. My colleague the Hon Leung Kwok Hung filibustered the Government Budget to demand a comprehensive retirement protection scheme. Retirement protection is a livelihood issue; whether or not to provide a comprehensive scheme is a political decision.

Thus "pan-politicization" is not a creation of certain individuals or political groups

for the purpose of obstructing government policies. Of course there are indeed cases of politicians and political parties deliberately "politicizing" social and economic issues in order to create conflicts they can capitalize on in their next election campaign. But we have to realize that every major public policy will affect people's interest in different ways, some less favourably than others. Even if a proposed policy gives everybody something, there will always be some who cry "unfair" because they think they are receiving less than others. Few policies affecting people's interest can have the public's unanimous support, and if the government fails to neutralize opposition and allows it to ferment in the community, it may eventually grow to such a scale as make it impossible for the policy to be implemented.

How can opposition be dissipated? One way is to talk the opposition out with reason. For example the government can say to those who are against expanding landfills and building incinerators that we should consider the greatest good for the whole community, that some of us will have to put up with the presence of obnoxious but necessary facilities in our neighbourhood.

But we all know how difficult it is to persuade people to make sacrifices for the benefit of society. So sometimes the government may have to mobilize social pressure to force the opposition to give in, or on other occasions to negotiate for a price to compensate for the hardships caused. Each one these methods of dealing with opposition, be it persuasion, coercion or negotiation, requires political skills.

A political leader cannot only convince himself what he is doing is good for the people. He must also convince a majority of the public, and that is politics. Simply complaining about "pan-politicization" does not help. For "pan-politicization" is a fact of life these days, not only in Hong Kong, but probably everywhere. Even in the Mainland, where authoritarian rule used to work, mass demonstrations against unpopular government decisions are now no longer an uncommon sight.

It is therefore necessary for political leaders to possess political skills, without which they will be unable to win support for their decisions. But the ability to win support is not the same as the ability to make good or correct decisions. Bad political decisions cannot lead to good governance, even if public support is successfully garnered. So we must also ask, what other qualities should we expect of our political leaders, to ensure they can make the right decisions for the people?

I believe there are two more important qualities. The first is political morality, which we must expect of a political leader if we are to believe he will always make decisions in the best interest of the people. Confucian teaching says those in power should possess three virtues: charity, wisdom and courage. I think these three virtues can be taken as the ingredients of political morality.

"Charity" is a profound concept in Confucianism, but we can take it simply to mean altruism, or benevolence to all, especially to the needy. A good political leader

should always put the needs and happiness of the people before his own. He should think of the interest of the greatest number of people when making important policy decisions.

"Wisdom" for a political leader is the conscious exercise of good judgment to make proper decisions. When deciding to push forward with a particular policy he should ask: Is my decision consistent with the principles of social justice? Have I considered the interest of all affected parties with fairness? Is this the right time for implementing this policy? Are circumstances suitable for its implementation? Is it within the capability of my working team to implement it?

"Courage" is a third constituent of political morality. When the political leader is confident he has made a good and wise decision, he must have the courage to put it into action and see it through even if there is strong opposition. A responsible decision-maker cannot simply act in accordance with the results of opinion polls, doing whatever has popular support and shying away from any unpopular undertaking. He must have the courage to push forward with a policy decision if he believes it is for the greatest good of the community, even if many refuse to support it for the time being.

The one remaining quality I think a political leader should possess, is he must have a clear set of political beliefs which form the basis of his political decisions, of his ideas as to how various conflicts should be resolved. The political beliefs will define whether he is left or right, liberal or conservative.

Every government must work to promote development; this is the "hard rule" as pointed out by Mr. Deng Xiaoping. Economic development must come first, before any social development is possible. However, economic development will inevitably be accompanied by a host of conflicts that must be resolved by the political leader. There is conflict between growth and distribution of wealth, and between growth and environment protection and energy conservation. There will also be conflict between economic growth and democracy, for while democracy can prevent disastrous decisions made by an authoritarian government, it does so at the expense of efficiency. It may lengthen the process of decision-making and slacken the pace of growth. Choosing the balance point in each case is a political decision, made in accordance with the political beliefs of the leader.

Hong Kong needs political leaders with well-defined political beliefs, noble political morality and effective political skills. There was a time when we all believed we had such a superb system of government that our economy would keep growing and our livelihood would keep improving, without anybody bothering about politics. Times have changed. We should take a new look at politics, and realize that we need high-quality political leaders to take Hong Kong forward.

Thank you.