

Learning the Ropes

The term “learning the ropes” had nautical origins, dating back to the days of sailing ships, when different ropes controlled different sails. The discharge papers of seamen often included the sentence: “He knows the ropes.” That meant the seaman concerned was familiar with the ropes which guided the main sails, but not necessarily that he was a very experienced seafarer.

I was to learn after my return from The Hague that operating the tangle of ropes inside a vast bureaucracy was far more complicated and uncertain a skill than dealing with ropes on sailing ships. One of my first responsibilities upon returning was to report on the academic activities at the Institute of Social Studies. That quickly led to a corporate decision to rule out the suitability of the course for Chinese Administrative Officers.

My own views were more mixed. Interacting with officials from other countries with different cultural and administrative problems was broadening, even though not entirely relevant to the circumstances of Hong Kong. Naturally, I maintained a discreet silence on the personal effects of my sojourn, since others were unlikely to stay with a Dutch family or engage in an extramarital affair.

My next posting was to the Labour Department, as a Senior Labour Officer. That post, up till that point, had never been filled by an Administrative Officer. A request, however, had come in from that Department for my services.

The appointment delighted me for I presumed the request must have originated from David Alexander, that genial and open-minded Scot then occupying the post of Deputy Commissioner for Labour. It had been extremely enjoyable working for him at Social Welfare. Beneath his slightly tentative and self-effacing manners, he was a war hero with a firm determination to do good.

He was a gentleman with plenty to be proud about. He was a linguist of the first order, with skills extending beyond the conventional French and German to Cantonese, Arabic, Malay, Hausa, Urdu, Pushtu, Punjabi and

Russian. But he had remained a soul of humility, with none of that elbowing ambition to reach the top that often possessed men of lesser talent. His wife, Jay, was a demure, friendly and eminently likeable lady.

David Alexander first came to Hong Kong in 1941 as a British Army private working for the Ministry of Economic Warfare. He was a translator and censor of commercial correspondence but was fortuitously sent to India for officer training just before the Japanese attacked. After being commissioned, he joined the Special Operations Force 136 and was dropped into the Malayan jungles behind Japanese lines, to join Chinese Communist guerrillas in the war. Legend had it he kept ambushing the Japanese for 10 days after they had surrendered, simply because news did not reach him. For his extraordinary daring and leadership, he was not only promoted to the rank of lieutenant-colonel but was also awarded a military MBE.

He joined the Colonial Service after the war and, after serving in Nigeria and Cyrenaica, he found himself posted back to his preferred Hong Kong in 1953.

The Commissioner for Labour when I joined the department was also a friendly and likeable man, one of the very few expatriate officers with a good grasp of Chinese. He was, however, on his final assignment before retirement, so he was content to leave most of the everyday affairs to his deputy. He had a fondness for fly fishing and his mind was already toying with the possibility of creating a new export business to Britain by using the plentiful supply of casual female labour in Hong Kong to tie fishing flies. David Alexander was to succeed him as Commissioner.

Another reason I was happy with my new assignment was because the post of Senior Labour Officer had the same salary grading as a Senior Administrative Officer, which meant I would be entitled to several hundred dollars extra in acting pay each month. The Department, being in the centre of town, was also closer to home than the Colonial Secretariat.

An extra piece of good news was conveyed by David Alexander when I reported for work. The government had finally given approval to replace dry rations to destitutes with cash payments. A tiny but satisfactory result nonetheless, even though securing it required a protracted exchange of bureaucratic correspondence.

But there was disappointing news as well. It transpired that David Baron had applied for early retirement, because both he and his wife wanted their teenage daughter, Josephine, to be brought up in an English environment. David's diligence, integrity, devotion to duty, and his unflappability in leadership would all be sorely missed. Removing Julia's dazzling artistic light from a place already overwhelmed by so much scrambling for material riches was also disheartening. Their genuine love of the city and its people had gained them the affection of many. Their leaving in 1966 impoverished the entire city.

Before their departure, they extended me a standing invitation to visit their home in Ludlow. I took up their invitation twice during the years that immediately followed. Their home was pleasant and agreeable and I much relished being shown their successful work on a large vegetable patch. David, in addition, had taken on a job as director of the National Extension College at Cambridge, the precursor to the Open University.

Julia, back in England, continued her artistic output. She had a small studio and David would frequently be there, helping her to mix paint, stretch canvasses or cut mosaics. They led such a companionable life that I could only grow envious of it. I had to hold my tongue, however, to avoid upsetting them with news of the slow disintegration of my own marriage.

There was, nonetheless, one aspect of staying with them that I found disconcerting. Apart from their excessive hospitality, David insisted upon serving me breakfast in bed. He said it was a house rule. As a Chinese, I found the gesture highly embarrassing, not only because he was an elderly gentleman far above such menial duties but also because he had once been my

respected superior and mentor. I tried to get up earlier to be downstairs before he could perform his morning service. But that only caused him to rise earlier still, to bring the breakfast tray!



David Baron in retirement

Although in later years I made many brief trips to Britain, most of them centred around official talks in Whitehall or business propositions in other parts of the country. Hence Ludlow was too far out of the way to pay them further visits. Instead, I would bring in a box of duty-free cigars for David, knowing he would enjoy them. For his part, he was aware of my appetite for reading and whenever he came across a book he thought suited my taste he would send me a copy. We also kept up an erratic correspondence, because David was always anxious for news of Hong Kong and of his former colleagues.

I never visited the Barons again till about 2005, after I had learnt that David had developed a serious hip problem which rendered walking difficult. On that occasion I visited him in the company of two Administrative

Officers who had both been Directors of Social Welfare after David -- Anson Chan and Selwyn Alleyne.

Anson Chan, who had risen to become the first Chinese Chief Secretary, was accompanied by her husband, Archie, while Selwyn Alleyne was accompanied by his wife, Ellie, who herself had followed a highly successful career as Registrar at the University of Hong Kong. We all stayed at a hotel close to his home. I never saw the Barons again thereafter, though David and I still spoke now and then on the telephone. He remained forever anxious for snippets of Hong Kong news.

The gracious and talented Julia passed away in 2008 and David himself followed in 2010, ending wonderful friendships which had remained undimmed by time.

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The moment I got down to work at the Labour Department, I knew my goose was well and truly cooked. I found a situation making less sense than any in *Alice in Wonderland*. The expectation, David Alexander told me, was that I should help oversee a modern industrial regime in Hong Kong the Fabians would be proud of. An impossible task.

It appeared Britain had signed a series of the conventions of the International Labour Organisation, the first of the specialised agencies set up by the United Nations back in 1946. Such conventions were legally binding once they had been ratified by member states. As a consequence of Britain's decision, the colonial legislature of Hong Kong had to pass sets of regulations to give effect to the terms of those conventions. They covered various facets of activities in factories and industrial undertakings, ranging from safety and health at work to safe access and egress at work places, from guarding moving parts of machinery to accessibility of first aid equipment on shop floors. Every

industrial undertaking, from construction sites to power generating plants, was covered. Ancillary activities taking place within factories were also covered.

Just reading through the slew of laws and regulations made my head spin. Some key terms were not properly defined; others were left tantalisingly ambiguous. No doubt the legislation would demonstrate that British dominions were ostensibly in the forefront of promoting industrial health and safety standards in the industrialised world. Life would also be easier for ministers fending off domestic criticisms or parliamentary questions. But little account had been taken of many local situations.

To be sure, the large monopolies like the electric power and gas companies -- operating under franchises from the government -- could meet most requirements. So too could certain other franchised monopolies for buses and ferries. But purpose-built factory buildings were few and far between and only factories employing above a certain number of employees had to be registered. They totalled only about 10,000. But probably just as many worked in unregistered ones. For the most part, the workforce was just trying to skim a living in whatever way it could, often by perching precariously on granite hills. The daily wage for an unskilled labourer could be as low as five dollars -- the same wage I was earning as a cub reporter back in 1947.

The total population was estimated at around three million, with about half of them under the age of 25. Fortunately there was virtually no unemployment. People were prepared to work hard, in tenements, in domestic dwellings, in unnumbered huts in squatter areas, in abandoned pig sties or in any unused nook or corner they could fit themselves into. To expect them to work only in properly registered work places with equipment up to international standards was a fantasy too far.

To discharge my responsibilities, I had under my command two relatively small teams of inspectors -- factory inspectors and labour inspectors - - both far too inadequate for regular inspections of registered factories, let alone

unregistered ones. The factory inspectors dealt with the health and safety aspects while the labour inspectors saw to the non-exploitation of women and young workers. Certain other responsibilities under the legislation, like vocational training, formation of trade unions, encouraging collective bargaining and so forth fell under the purview of other sections of the department.

In order to get a feel of the many tens of thousands of different types of work places and to gain an appreciation of how my staff had been enforcing the law, I got the most experienced of my inspectors to take me with them on their individual beats. As we moved along, I kept probing them on how they determined the need or otherwise for taking action.

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During one of the early walks with an experienced inspector, we came across a shop on the ground floor of a tenement building making replica paper cars, planes, mansions, gold ingots and the like for people to burn as offerings to their ancestors, in the belief they would thus not be deprived of such luxuries in the afterlife. The shop had about six workers, with a couple of them working on the pavement, putting together coloured paper, strips of bamboo, paste and bits of twisted wires.

I asked whether the shop was considered an industrial undertaking, a cottage industry, a kind of craft workshop or what. The inspector was not sure. He said such activities were generally ignored because they were on a small scale and the materials used did not present any real danger to either workers or to the general public.

Farther along on our journey, we saw a number of grannies sitting on the pavements outside their homes assembling plastic flowers. I had seen old folks like them every day, while walking to my office. I asked if they got a

minimum wage. The inspector said there was no legal minimum wage. It was normal for manufacturers of plastic components to sub-contract the assembly work to an outside party, who in turn would recruit old people or children to do the assembling, on a piece work basis. None of them would be paid very much but it was a chance for earning some loose change.

The inspector then led me to a building site which was caged in the traditional bamboo scaffolding used in Chinese construction. The bamboos had been expertly secured by strips of rattan.

“This is one of our biggest headaches,” the inspector explained. “Too many buildings going up. Don’t have the staff to visit them all, let alone to keep them under surveillance. When buildings were only three or four storeys, bamboo scaffolding worked well. Now, at 20 storeys plus, a host of problems. During typhoons and heavy winds, scaffolding collapses sometimes, injuring people, damaging cars, causing road closures.

“Most chaps working on them do without safety harnesses. That’s one of the reasons injuries and deaths keep climbing. Even when harnesses are available, they refuse them, claiming they hampered their movements. Co-workers would rib them for being sissies.

“It’s hard to catch anyone in the act. Contractors seem to have better intelligence than us. Before we can show our papers to a site manager and put on a hard hat, workers would be enjoying a tea or a smoking break. Or doing some other indoor task.”

“Can’t we work with unions to educate them?” I asked. “We’re supposed to have a section in the department doing that.”

The inspector resisted a temptation to laugh. “Sir, how can we get a union to accept illegal immigrants as members? Can we encourage illegals to form one? They’d run a mile from any official. They’ve taken all kinds of risks to get here. Or else have paid snakeheads to smuggle them in. They’re controlled here by gang masters who offer them to contractors at cut rates. All

they hope is to make enough money to send home.

“Sometimes everything they’ve done comes to nothing. A crooked gang master would get an urge to do his civic duty just before payday, informing immigration authorities or the police where a collection of illegal immigrants might be located. Raids are mounted and the illegals get sent back for punishment. Wages due to them disappear somewhere.”

“That’s terrible!” I exclaimed. My natural sympathy for underdogs caused me to erupt in anger. “That’s wrong! They should at least get paid before being sent back.”

“Makes little difference,” the inspector said, nonchalantly. “They’d lose everything in fines or hush money, this side of the border or the other. Some still hope they might get another go.”

A bitterness gathered within me. Such unfortunates were in similar predicaments to the ones I had encountered. At 13, I had to work illegally as a refugee in Perth to fill my stomach. In all the subsequent years, I had never been able to earn enough for a decent living. Only family members, relatives or friends had saved me from disaster. Now, fast approaching the age of 37, I could still not give my family the bare essentials without subsidies from my in-laws.

I could not even enjoy a game of *mah-jong* because I could not risk losing money. My wife had to do without most things women hankered after. When would such a mean existence ever end? Encountering workers far worse off than myself, I was reminded of what I had witnessed ages ago at the magistracies as a cub reporter. I could not understand why the exploited did not rise up in revolt.

It came to me on a sudden I was myself now part of an oppressive system, snuffing out whatever frail hopes or unattainable dreams lingering in the hearts of others. It was intolerable.

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I went with another factory inspector on a further field trip to investigate a complaint about noise coming from a factory in a domestic building. The location was in Kowloon City, near Kai Tai Airport, not far from where my Fifth Maternal Aunt and Uncle used to live.

The inspector was an affable man in his late forties, a little careworn but very much on top of his duties. When we got there, we found eight women operating sewing machines in what was supposed to be a small living room.

“May I ask who’s the owner or principal tenant?” the inspector said. “I’m from the Labour Department.”

A middle-aged woman with streaks of gray in her hair owned up to being the tenant.

“Auntie, you seem to be running a factory,” the inspector said, showing his identification. “This is a domestic building; no factories allowed.”

“Times are hard, Sir, and rents are high,” the woman said. “We’re just trying to earn a little extra to get by.”

The inspector turned to a couple of the other women and asked: “You getting regular wages or doing piece work?”

“Piece work,” they both replied in unison.

Turning back to the middle-aged woman, the inspector said: “You see, Auntie, a complaint has been lodged against your factory, for making too much noise. I’m forced to act.”

“*Aiyah!*” the woman exclaimed, with some agitated shaking of her head. “People are mean and spiteful. How much noise can sewing machines make? Why don’t you listen to the pneumatic drills outside. Or the piling machines that never stop. Or the aircraft zooming overhead. Please give us a chance.”

“I’m sorry, Auntie” the inspector said. “The law’s the law. You’ll have to pack this in. I’ll come back in a couple of days and if you’re still operating, I’ll have to issue a summons and take you to court.”

The gray-haired woman nodded with resignation. Some of the other women began packing their belongings.

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After we had left the building, I suggested stopping for a cup of tea. We chose a small cafe nearby and ordered our drinks.

“You did a smooth job back there,” I said. “What do you think will happen to those women now?”

“Oh, they’ll find another place to work,” the inspector replied, offhandedly. “There’re lots of places like that around.”

“Then we’re just playing a game of hide and seek, aren’t we? We stop a few people making a living but don’t do any lasting good.”

“Our job’s to enforce regulations, close down illegal factories.”

“Have you heard of something known as ‘sewing circles’?”

The inspector hesitated for a moment, uncertain of his ground.

“Don’t think I’ve come across sewing circles,” he replied.

“You see, before the war, they used to be quite popular in Britain and America. Groups of housewives get together to form sewing circles, usually as a social or charitable activity. The laws in both those countries never had any trouble accepting them as legitimate.

“I’ve watched and listened carefully to how you handled those ladies at that apartment. I admired how you got quickly to the heart of the matter. But your approach may not be legally sustainable. Your decision to close the place was based on self-incriminating statements by the women themselves. You gave them no warning their statements might be used against

them.

“Under British law, there’s a presumption of innocence, until the contrary is proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Now let’s take a hypothetical situation: Suppose upon our arrival, the women had refused to make any statement or to answer any question without their lawyer present. . . .”

“But, Sir, those women are simple folk. They’re too poor to hire a lawyer. When you question them, they generally admit what’s going on right away.”

“That’s precisely what I mean. Should we be taking advantage of their innocence or their lack of sophistication with the law? Suppose upon our arrival, a lawyer -- regardless of whether they can really afford one or not -- merely asserts the women were members of a sewing circle. What evidence could we present on their operating an illegal work place?”

“A number of women were working on sewing machines.”

“Yes, that would be consistent with running a sewing circle.”

“The women were shabbily dressed. They didn’t look like middle-class housewives.”

“Ah, be careful! Is it wise to argue that only the well-to-do can run sewing circles?”

The inspector paused. “I didn’t mean it that way. What I meant was they didn’t look like women who could afford to spend time on anything that would not produce some income.”

“You’re probably right. But that doesn’t answer the point of principle.”

“What about the neighbour’s complaint of noise?”

“Agreed. But you also heard the lady complaining of the noise from pneumatic drills, piling machines, overflying aircraft. Our staff would first have to take sound recordings on noise levels from the sewing machines over a period of time, comparing them with other noise. At the end of the

exercise, I doubt if we could get so much as a noise abatement order against the people in the flat.”

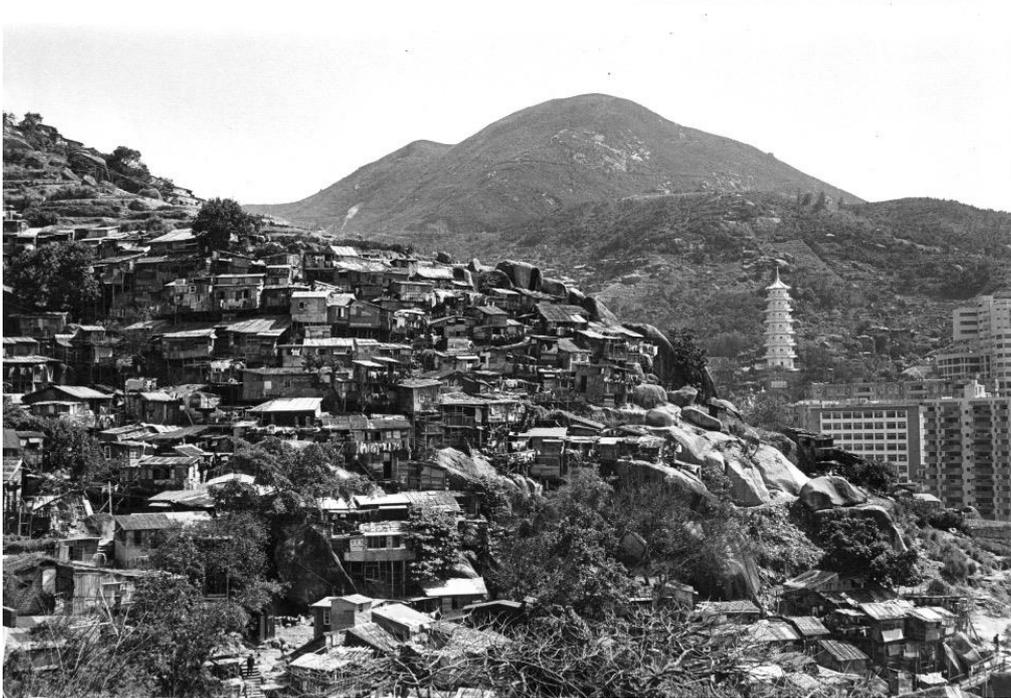
“Then what would you have us do, Sir?”

“I don’t know. You chaps have been doing this job far longer than I. I’m just trying to understand how decisions are reached. I was hoping you could tell me.”

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After we had finished our tea, we ventured into a nearby squatter area on a hill ironically named Diamond Hill. Huts and shacks, of different shapes and sizes, sprawled in disarray. They were made of wood, corrugated metal sheets and various other types of salvaged materials, jammed cheek by jowl, all slipshod and ugly. None had been numbered for identification or postal purposes. A couple of chickens were tethered by strings outside a few of them.

My heart skipped a beat upon entering the settlement. The last time I had gone through one had been 16 years earlier, as a cub reporter. Nothing much appeared to have changed about such settlements, except for their size and number. I could see some of them from the roof garden of Wise Mansion, as mere discoloured blotches on distant hills.



Squatter settlements at Tai Hang.

Photo courtesy of Annalise Pedersen Connell and Gwulo.com



One of the immensely crowded early government resettlement blocks where living space is allocated on the basis of 24 square feet for every adult.

Photo courtesy of Mike Cussans and Gwulo.com

Now, at close quarters, ribbons of greenish effluence could be seen trickling down ruts in the middle of the uneven footpaths within the maze. Overhead, festoons of electrical wires languished with indifference, the result of illegal tapping from power cables.

“That’s not our problem,” the inspector said quickly, following the direction of my gaze. “If you want to see them really running rampant, we could nip through the old Kowloon Walled City. Those are problems for the power companies to take up with the police. Whether they get disconnected is a matter we stay away from. We’re only concerned with the safety of power equipment being used.”

I nodded in appreciation for that clarification, noting at the same time that there was still no running water in the encampment. A prolonged drought had worsened matters. Water, when available, had to be fetched from standpipes at the foot of the hill and carried up by occupants, young and old alike.

Our presence as outsiders was immediately noticed -- by women doing household chores outside their tiny huts, by children running around at play and even by the odd stray dog. A soundless kind of bush signal appeared to have been transmitted throughout the settlement, warning of the presence of outsiders. They usually spelt trouble.

The first hut we peered into looked like a small family carpentry business with only two men wearing singlets and shorts working inside. There was every indication they lived on the premises as well, for items of clothing and cooking utensils were in evidence. The two were working on separate woodworking machines but a metal guard to a moving part of one of the machines had been removed. The two men continued their work, paying scant attention to our appearance.

“Business must be good,” the inspector began, by way of an opening gambit.

“Passable,” the older of the two men replied.

“I’m from the Labour Department. I see a guard has been removed from one of your machines,” the inspector said. “Can be dangerous. An accident can occur.”

“Yes, had to do some repairs. We’re just testing if it works before putting it back.”

“Very good. Safety first,” the inspector said, as we left. After we had gone a few paces, he said: “That’s the standard excuse. Most of them can only afford patched up machines. They frequently break down. Too much trouble removing guards each time for repairs and then putting them back. So they take a chance and leave them off. Time is always money for these people.”

The October sun was still hot and oppressive and I was beginning to perspire. The air was fetid with a mixture of human and animal odours, of stale food and rotting garbage. The green slime trickling down the ruts in the middle of the tortuous paths had its own stench.

This was yet another layer of human existence in Hong Kong, I thought, of people living on the very edge, discarded and abandoned, except for a few voluntary aid workers. But what could those few do when the needs were so enormous for so many?

In less disjointed times, these unfortunates would not have been left in such a pass. There would be the extended family and clan to fall back on. Even if that failed, there would be the geographically based rural or village co-operative associations offering assistance in times of natural disasters or sickness and ill-health. But a civil war and a prolonged famine had driven them from their various provinces and localities, to end up as total strangers among other unfortunates, locked in a struggle for survival in an alien and unwelcoming place.

My memory flitted back to a few of the high-sounding things I had

read, to Prince Albert's talk of "the realisation of the unity of mankind" at the Great Exhibition in 1851, to the call at the base of the Statute of Liberty to be given "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free". The truth was that most words turned out to be just platitudes. None of the rich nations of the world really wanted such wretches beyond the token few for the sake of form and to salve their collective conscience.

Britain had *de jure* responsibility over the territory but it was offering no refuge and making no financial contribution to improve the welfare of refugees. It claimed to have too many immigrants already. The usual alibis of language and cultural differences, of the difficulties of integration, the lack of skill among the immigrants, their adverse impact on social services and so forth were trotted out with regularity. Such alibis were destined to be repeated endlessly over the subsequent decades, by people unwilling or incapable of sharing a common humanity.

What happened to the Zolas and Blakes who used to cry out on their behalf, the Jan Steens and the Hogarths to illustrate their miseries, so that later generations might know of man's inhumanity to his fellows? Or were those poor souls to serve as guinea pigs, to verify Darwin's notion of the survival of the fittest, to determine how long they could really survive?

For a moment I resented my own countrymen for their ready acceptance of their poverty and squalor. They made me feel guilty I could do so little for them. For a few brief seconds I imagined what might happen if someone led them loose at one of the sumptuous buffets at posh expatriate clubs and told them they could have their fill.

But my reflections were soon interrupted by the inspector finding someone running an electroplating enterprise in a nearby shack. It was only a one-man show. He was inadequately protected for his work but at least he had on a pair of industrial goggles.

"Where electroplating is being carried out in a proper industrial

building, the building's supervisor and its safety officials have to be informed," the inspector volunteered, shaking his head. "That's because of the use of oxidising agents like chromic acid and cyanide. Since he's a one-man operation in a hut, who is there to inform? His neighbours possibly, who might get alarmed enough to chase him away. What he's doing is very dangerous. If some agents were accidentally combined, they could produce violent explosions and fires. With so many people living in flammable structures around him, he shouldn't be here."

"Nobody should be in places like this," I said, testily. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"The electroplating'll have to be stopped, till some more solid structure far from this kind of area can be found."

The inspector spoke to the man and told him he had to stop and move elsewhere. He was putting other people's lives at risk by doing electroplating where he was.

"I've always been careful," the man said. His face was dull and resentful. "Where else am I going to make my living?"

"You could find a spot in an industrial building," the inspector said.

"And who's going to pay the rent? Right here it's free."

"Here you're squatting on Crown land. The government could clear you at any time. Perhaps you can find an isolated shack in the New Territories. It'll be better for you in the long run. I'll ask among my colleagues to see what they can suggest. But you'll have to start moving out some of the oxidising agents right away. I'll be back tomorrow with more staff to see that it's been done."

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By November of 1965, even as I was still struggling to come to grips with the multifarious workshops and industrial undertakings covered by the tangle of labour legislation, the Star Ferry Company applied to government for a fare increase of between 50 and 100%. The company was one of two franchised operators of cross-harbour ferry services linking Hong Kong Island with Kowloon. Prior to the construction of the cross-harbour tunnel, ferry services were vital to citizens travelling between the two central sections of the city.

There was no reason why the general public should have been made aware of such an application. Up till that point in my career, I had no responsibility for the terms of monopoly franchises handed out by the government. Furthermore, such applications would usually be handled confidentially, behind closed doors. In the best colonial fashion, citizens would usually learn of changes in tariff only after everything had been cut and dried between the government and the franchise holder.

Before dealing with the fiasco that ensued, perhaps a digression into a historical curiosity might assist in understanding the furore and rioting that followed.

When I first visited Britain, I noticed that the carriages on British Rail were all classified as either first class or third class. Where was the logic of not including a second class, I had wondered. I asked several English friends for an explanation, but none that was remotely satisfactory emerged. That puzzle kept bothering me like an itch that was infuriatingly out of reach. After a while, I surmised it must be one of those British eccentricities which defied all rational explanation. Or it might be a device dreamt up by the ruling classes to indicate to the great unwashed that they should know their places. Aspirations to be first class must be out of the question for any of them, since not even a second class existed.

I still wonder today whether some genius in sociology or

psychology might one day explain this British peculiarity.

In any event, with the 19th century advent of empire, that first class/third class syndrome became transplanted into Hong Kong's public transport system. Hence local ferries and trams got likewise divided into first class and third class compartments. It was against such a background that the Star Ferry Company put forward an application for a fare increase.

By 1965, however, the government had half-heartedly got around to forming a Transport Advisory Committee of selected citizens to convey the impression that some form of public accountability was available. The Star Ferry application was thus duly passed on to the committee for advice.

From this point onwards, almost everybody involved contributed towards turning it into an unholy mess. First of all, the confidentiality of the application was breached. The public got wind of the size of the demand and reacted negatively. Then came other leaks. In granting franchises, the government had generally limited profits to around the mid-teens as a return on capital. It was claimed that part of the Star Ferry's case was due to a fall in profits.

Even fairly dim-witted fellows knew corporate accounts could be structured in many ways, depending on what any management might want them to show or obscure. Thus a demand arose for all financial statements of transport and other utilities to be opened for public examination. Demands also arose for negotiations between the government and all utilities to be likewise open to the public.

Neither the Star Ferry nor the government went out of their way to allay those fears and concerns. Clarifying that the increase was intended only for first class fares and not for the third class might have taken out some of the heat, since the bulk of the less well-off travelled third class. The first class fare was then 20 cents per passenger and the third class 10 cents. So what the company was really after -- at least initially -- was to increase first class fares to

30 or 40 cents.

Other rumours soon circulated that the management of the Star Ferry had “conversations” with the management of its rival ferry company, the Hong Kong and Yaumati Ferry Company, before submitting its bid for a fare increase. Why should “conversations” have taken place in a free market between competitors on prospective fare increases? Suspicions were ignited that the demand for an increase in Star Ferry fares was merely the thin end of the wedge, to test the public mood before more general increases across the board. Opposition thus gathered momentum.

Towards the end of March in 1966, it was announced that the Transport Advisory Committee had approved a 25% increase in first class fares, amounting to five cents. But yet another leak revealed there had been a dissenting voice within the committee. That opposing voice came from the indefatigable Mrs. Elsie Elliot.

On April 4th of 1966, a 27-year-old translator by the name of So Sau-Chung started a hunger strike on the Hong Kong Island side of the Star Ferry concourse, wearing a jacket with words on its back urging support for Mrs. Elliot’s opposition to the fare increase. The next day, another young man by the name of Lo Kei joined him.

The police moved quickly. So Sau-Chung was arrested on April 5th, hauled before a magistrate the following day and sentenced to two months in gaol for “obstruction of a passageway”. For some unfathomable reason, Lo Kei was not arrested.

With the imprisonment of So, massive demonstrations erupted all over the colony. They soon descended into rioting. A curfew was imposed on April 7th, which happened to be my birthday. By the time the unrest was over on April 10th, the net result was that one person had been killed, 1,800 arrested and 258 sent to gaol.

The fare increase was duly implemented.

It was only in January of 1967, that an attempt was made to arrest Lo Kei, on an alleged charge of theft. But it was reported that when the police arrived at his home he was found dead. An inquest found he had committed suicide. Most people took that official narrative with large pinches of salt.

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Given the public mood following the riots, I realised that if I sent my inspectors around implementing the letter of the law on factories and industrial undertakings, I would probably provoke an even greater upheaval in the colony. While doing my rounds with them, I could easily spot infractions of one kind or another in almost every factory I entered. I therefore took my concerns to David Alexander.

“David,” I said. “I thought you were my friend. How come you’ve asked for me to tackle this impossible job?”

“When one needs help, who else should one turn to but a friend?” David Alexander replied. “I’ve got my job too and it involves much more than just your section. I could do with all the help I can get.”

“With regulations in such a mess, what can anyone do? The regs’re completely barmy, out of touch with reality. You’ll need a Solomon to sort them out.”

“You may well be right. But Solomons no longer exist; so you and I will have to sort them out. We don’t make the rules. We’re only charged with implementing them.”

“But they can’t be implemented in any way that makes any practical, political or economic sense. Let’s take the most obvious point. Our inspectors, like most civil servants, work from nine to five, while many of our local factories work round the clock. Can we really assume that infringements of the law only occur during office hours?”

“Of course not. Are you suggesting a round-the-clock industrial police?”

“Good heavens, no! That would just create more problems.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I don’t know. Change some laws; scrap the rest. Can’t think of a simpler solution. Take the law on protecting women and young persons, as another example. Our labour inspectors are supposed to prevent factories coercing them into working consistently long shifts of 10 or more hours, often disguised as voluntary overtime.

“But many of our factories work round-the-clock, in two or three shifts. What is there to prevent a woman or a young person doing an eight-hour shift going around the corner to a different factory to do another eight-hour shift? Our hands are tied. We cannot stop them even for their own good. We are in a ludicrous situation of being able to prevent people from being exploited for 10 or more hours a day in one factory but can’t do anything about their working 16 hours a day in two or more factories.”

“So what’s the answer?”

“End poverty. Except for the restless, the adventurous or the outcast, who would want to risk leaving for unknown shores if he can live decently and safely at home? Wars, persecution, dire poverty, bad governance and hopelessness over the future are the factors driving people into becoming refugees or illegal immigrants. Or willingly being trafficked as wage or sex slaves.”

“Huh! Now you’re talking about big international issues which have stumped political leaders for centuries. We’re only civil servants, trying to enforce local laws.”

“But everything’s interconnected, like karma. Cause and effect follow each other as night follows day, in ways most of us cannot even begin to comprehend. Our system allows the rich to rob the poor in all sorts of ways and

our government doesn't even try to make it easier for ordinary citizens to gain redress.

“Look at our property developers. Not only do they use cheap illegal workers for constructing their buildings but most of us have to suffer endlessly the pounding of their piling work. Does anyone get compensated for enduring such nerve-wrecking noise?”

“In England there is legal redress for the loss of ancient light. Those tall, tasteless blocks they keep putting up certainly cut off natural light for many. But how can the poor sods affected mount expensive legal challenges, which might take years to resolve through our courts?”

I paused momentarily but David Alexander did not respond.

“There is an interesting case pending at the moment over the question of privacy,” I continued. “You see, some time back, one of our churches sold a piece of land in the mid-levels to a developer on the cheap, because the land contained a stipulation on the height of any future development. The original fathers of the church had put in that restriction because their nuns had constructed next door a school for girls, complete with dormitories for the nuns and girls, all surrounded by high walls. They wanted privacy for the staff and the students, so that they would not be gawked at from vantage points overlooking the walls. Now the developer is challenging the height restriction as unreasonable, because other tall buildings have been erected in the neighbourhood. The eventual outcome of the case may well set a precedent.”

“Haven't heard about that case,” David Alexander said.

“Well, you have now,” I continued. “Developers are only interested in maximising the plot ratios to squeeze in more units into a site to improve their profits. On average a real sharp developer can make a turn on his capital in as little as four years. Some even want to do it in three. That kind of profit is obscene!”

“That’s why everybody is crazy about getting into property. But every bigger building inevitably generates more human traffic on pavements, more cars on the roads, more noise and pollution and more loss of quietness, privacy, clean air, natural lighting and beauty of surroundings. Many can no longer see the sky from their homes. Just look at the geometrical blocks plunked down everywhere and sold at astronomical prices as flats or offices. They bring nothing but isolation, despoliation and ugliness. A few economists are already beginning to talk about the external diseconomies of property in built-up areas and the social costs of continuous growth.”

“My incorrigible dreamer,” David Alexander said gently, when I paused. “Pretty soon you will be demanding the government appoint a Baron Haussmann to beautify our city.”

“Not a bad idea at all!”

“But before you can have a Haussmann, you first have to have a Napoleon. This city is never going to produce a Napoleon.”

“That is evident, but why not a levy on developers and make them pay for beauty? They can afford it. You must remember the days when Nathan Road had trees on both sides. Why not insist, for instance, on developers paying for public gardens, tree planting and putting in sitting out areas for every so many blocks that they build?”

David Alexander shook his head wearily. “Both of us might be called David but property developers are a Goliath too strong for either of us. Let’s face it. They’ve got everybody on their side -- the bankers who finance them, the architects who design their buildings, the merchants who sell them cement and building rods, the lawyers who do their conveyancing, the estate agents who market their products, the big businesses wanting offices in the heart of town, every struggling executive who dreams of a mortgage for his own home, and so on and so forth. Can we take them all on? Besides, our remit covers only factories and industrial undertakings, not the complete

redesigning of our living environment.”

“Well, a building site is an industrial undertaking, and a rising number of industrial accidents are happening on them. I would like to station two inspectors permanently at each and every site to see that no corners are cut.”

“But you don’t have enough inspectors even to visit all the sites, let alone stationing anybody at any of them. With the staff situation as it is, we will just have to tackle the worst breaches first.”

“I can’t argue against that, I suppose,” I said. “But you must realise that it places our inspectors in an invidious position. If they act against the most serious offenders and leave the less serious ones alone, rumours are bound to circulate that they are not enforcing the law because some rascals are paying them off. And I can’t guarantee that in some cases that might not actually be the case.”

David Alexander shook his head and sighed. “We don’t live in a perfect world, do we? Just do your best. Incidentally, when you have some spare time, jot down your notions about diseconomies of development and forcing developers to pay for social amenities. I’d like to toss those ideas around for reactions.”

* * *

Meanwhile, preoccupied with the colony’s domestic problems, hardly any of Hong Kong’s top officials paid much attention to Chairman Mao launching the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in May of 1966. A few China-watchers wrote speculative pieces about its aims to purge the remnants of capitalistic and traditional thinking from Chinese society. But hard information was scarce.

There were stories of bands of young, barely educated Red Guards

being formed. They rampaged around the country in orgies of mass hysteria, humiliating public officials, beating up people, seizing property and destroying historical relics, under the delusion they could re-shape the nation. Such was only to be expected when mass movements slipped beyond the control of their leaders. There were mass purges of senior Chinese officials like Liu Shao-Chi and Teng Hsiao-Ping, who got labelled as “Capitalist Roaders”. Some were imprisoned and tortured while others were sent to labour as ordinary peasants in villages and farms. Large numbers of urban youths were also banished to work in the countryside.

But those events, if followed by Hong Kong’s mandarins at all, must have appeared distant and far removed from their own lives. In any case, they had British passports and homes to go to should things get uncomfortable. The atmosphere might not have been all that different from the one which had prevailed among the diplomatic corps in Peking when rumours circulated about Chinese Christians being murdered by gangs of Boxers at the turn of the century. The concerns then of many diplomats and their wives had been upon how to be at their best for the British Embassy ball to celebrate Queen Victoria’s 81st birthday.

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After I had completed more than a year’s service with the Labour Department, I received notification I was to be re-assigned to the Economics Branch of the Colonial Secretariat, to help prepare for the next ministerial conference of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East to be held in Tokyo from 3 to 17 of April in 1967. The delegation was to be led by another unofficial Chinese member of the Executive or Legislative Council.

In a way, I regretted leaving the Labour Department because I had

enjoyed working with David Alexander and his sympathetic and down-to-earth approach to things. Unfortunately for me, we never had the chance to work together again. Our official paths sent us to different sectors of the bureaucracy. His wife, Jay, died tragically in 1973 and he himself retired in 1975. Unlike many of his contemporaries who retired from Hong Kong unmissed and unenvied, David left a warm glow of remembrance with every Chinese Administrative Officer who ever had the good fortune to work for him.



David Alexander on the electioneering trail
after retirement

He re-married in 1982 to a widow, Peggy James, who had been a former nurse, and continued to do voluntary community work. I visited them in Edinburgh in the early 1990s, before David was diagnosed as suffering from bone marrow cancer in 1993. He passed away in 1997, greatly missed by his many friends.

* * *

Although I had worked in the Colonial Secretariat before, I regarded my posting to the Economics Branch with a degree of trepidation. The reason was that, in spite of the Branch being headed by a Deputy Economic Secretary, it was supposed to work ultimately to the Financial Secretary, Sir John Cowperthwaite.

I had no direct dealings with Sir John when I was in the General Branch but his reputation had been awesome. Hearsay abounded, picturing him variously as cold, touchy, aloof, difficult and arrogant. Some said miserly too. Others alleged his decisions were often so terse that they were almost Delphic.

My precious sightings of him neither proved nor disproved any of those rumours. He was certainly a big man, standing somewhat over six feet and comfortably stout. His movements were quick and deliberate nonetheless, and he could seldom be spotted idling around chit-chatting with colleagues. I was therefore unsure of how I would fare working for such a man. He was in essence in control of all economic affairs, although no one seemed to address him by his other title of Economic Secretary. Everybody referred to him in minuting or in conversation by the abbreviated title of F.S.

The Economics Branch, like the General Branch, was a tightly organised unit. The Deputy Economic Secretary at its head was Mike Clinton. He had under him three Administrative Officers as Assistant Secretaries, together with the usual supporting staff. The colour of its file jackets was a bright distinctive yellow.

The Branch's range of responsibilities was vast and weighty. They stretched from developing policies on commerce and industry to agriculture and fisheries, from controlling banking and financial services to international transport, from determining franchises for power, gas and other utilities to

managing government reserves, from postal services to wireless communications, and from monitoring the flows of hot money in and out of the colony to the absurdity of overseeing the operations of five competing stock exchanges in what was hailed by certain commentators as “the freest of free markets”. Dealing with the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East fell naturally within its sphere.

Mike Clinton was a pale, expressionless man of about five-foot-nine and of average build. He displayed an occasional twitch in one eye and was given to few words. His suits appeared rather crumpled, suggestive of a need for ironing or domestic care. Indeed, sometimes he gave the impression of continually wearing the same suit. Was it a quirk or was he experimenting to determine whether anyone would ever notice? When he spoke, he did so very softly, with hardly any change in expression. He rarely smiled.

Gossip around the Secretariat soon revealed the cause for the lack of facial expressions. He had apparently been a bomb disposal expert in London during the height of the German blitz in World War II. In trying to disarm a device, it blew up and took away part of his face. That part had been reconstructed through surgery, which failed to reconnect some of his nerves and facial muscles. That accounted for the occasional twitch in one eye and the inability to smile except in a crooked and unsightly parody of one. For his wartime exploits, he was awarded the George Medal with Bar, though no one within the Branch or outside had ever heard him mention a thing about his experiences in that dangerous line of work.

He and Sir John worked well as a team, for they were both essentially shy, dedicated men, each operating with a sound understanding of their respective subjects. Good instincts too, concerning how objectives could be best achieved. On some matters, Sir John made decisions off his own bat, without any of the careful submission of minutes and files laid down by Geoffrey Hamilton. Indeed, many of the things which required doing had no

precedents, for the colony was undergoing a period of rapid transition from its traditional role as an entrepôt into a significant manufacturing centre, with an influx of mainland refugees bringing along both fugitive capital and enhanced technological skills, particularly in the production of textiles.

While my initial task within the Branch as an Assistant Secretary was to prepare for the April ministerial meeting for the United Nations Economic Commission, one of my other responsibilities concerned the rapidly evolving field of civil aviation. It was a subject I found fascinating.

At the end of World War II, the United States and Britain were the two dominant civil aviation powers. They got together in 1946 in Bermuda to sign an agreement which set a precedent for thousands of other agreements between countries seeking to establish air services. The bible for understanding such a complex development of rights and obligations between states was the 726-page tome by Professor Bin Cheng of University College, London, entitled *The Law of International Air Transport*.

The world is a small place indeed, for I had certain family connections with the good professor through his wife, Fu Kam-Pui. The father of Kam-Pui was Fu Ping-Sheung, an important Chinese diplomat and a great friend of my Eighth Granduncle. As a teenager, Kam-Pui used to be friends with my granduncle's third daughter, Miu-Kwan. Since I was living at No. 33, I got to know Kam-Pui too.

If I had known I would end up dealing with the intricacies of the Chicago Convention and the inter-relationships between International Civil Aviation Organisation and the International Air Transport Association, I would have made more effort to visit their home in London when I was there, to learn directly from the great expert.

In any case, I lost no time in delving into that vast sphere. In practical terms, a country was deemed to control the airspace over its territory. Thus each country could grant other countries rights to overfly its airspace, to

bring in passengers and freight, to carry traffic beyond to third countries, and so forth. Naturally, if a state wanted to start its own air services to other countries, it would exchange reciprocal rights, collectively known as “The Freedoms of the Air”.

Britain was a far-flung empire at the time. So it had special advantages well beyond the geographical area of the British Isles. Its overseas domains gave it “cabotage” rights to those territories. They became basically what might be deemed domestic services, like flying between London and Manchester. Most nations usually reserved those rights for domestic carriers. Thus flying between Britain and Hong Kong was considered a flight between two British points and hence a monopoly reserved for the state-owned airline British Overseas Airways Corporation.

Air traffic rights were controlled by Whitehall. The problem was that the air services provided by BOAC between London and Hong Kong were appalling. Flights were often delayed, over-crowded, uncomfortable and lacking in amenities like free earphones for on-board music or films. They provided no free alcoholic drinks. I myself had been stranded or delayed repeatedly. Once I was stuck for four days in Madras because of an engine failure. The only good thing about that unintended stopover was that it developed my taste for Madras curry.

In any case, complaints piled up and got voiced in both the Hong Kong press and in the Legislative Council. It took years of arguments, however, before other British airlines were allowed to compete on the route to provide more and better services.

Moreover, there was another more fundamental conflict. Hong Kong saw the importance of developing itself as a convenient hub for international air services, both to support its growing trading relationships and to provide skilled employment in its ancillary aircraft maintenance industry. But Whitehall saw landing rights in the colony as a bargaining chip to gain

rights for BOAC from other countries or to secure financial advantages for its exchequer.

The application of the Scandinavians for a direct air service to Hong Kong was a case in point. Since BOAC wanted no further rights from the Scandinavians -- they had already exchanged rights between their two capitals -- Whitehall was not disposed to grant the request. At the urging of Hong Kong, however, rights were eventually granted -- in return for the payment of Danegeld by the Scandinavians into the British Treasury.

Therefore air services negotiations often became a three-cornered affair, with Hong Kong supporting foreign airlines wishing to mount services into the colony as against Whitehall's wish to restrict them -- unless the United Kingdom could secure some compensation in return. In any such negotiations, the Hong Kong representative naturally had to handle himself with finesse and circumspection, in order not to rub his Whitehall superiors the wrong way.

As time moved on, another complication entered the picture. In 1946, a pair of wartime pilots from America and Australia set up a commercial airline called Cathay Pacific. Later, when corporations like Butterfield & Swire and the Australian National Airlines injected capital into the venture, the airline became a serious regional player as a Hong Kong enterprise. Its interests too had to be catered for in negotiations.

Sir John and Mike Clinton had been the architects of the subtle and dexterous manoeuvrings involved. Sir John was an old hand at the game. When Hong Kong was forced to industrialise to support itself after its traditional entrepôt trade with China had been disrupted by international embargoes against China, it started to produce significant quantities of textiles. But pressure soon developed from both the United States and Britain for the colony to restrain its exports to protect their domestic industries. It fell on Sir John, then the Deputy Economic Secretary, to negotiate less restrictive deals.

Since I had been given the responsibility for civil aviation, I could not help marvelling over how two British Crown servants should stand up so stoutly for Hong Kong's interests, instead of simply following the wishes of their Whitehall overlords. Their stand caused me to decide that I -- as a Chinese whose salary was being paid by local taxpayers -- could not be any less committed to fighting for what I conceived to be the best interests of Hong Kong.