

Water, Water, Water

After my return to Hong Kong at the conclusion of the Bermuda II civil aviation negotiations in mid-1977, I was unexpectedly appointed Secretary for Economic Services. This did not imply an elevation as such; nor had anyone judged me suitable for advancement. I certainly did not lift a finger to seek the post.

The appointment came by way of one of those fortuitous hiccups in bureaucratic life, an accidental largesse bestowed upon an officer who happened to be in the right place at the right time. In my case, it came from nothing more earth-shaking than my immediate superior, the Secretary for Economic Services, becoming due for home leave. Someone therefore had to keep his seat warm. Since I was his only Deputy, the task fell upon my unprepossessing posterior. That had the effect of earning me a few hundred extra dollars a month in “acting pay”.

That feature in the system undoubtedly benefitted many officers whenever some high personage went on leave. For example, with the Financial Secretary going on holiday, the Secretary for Economic Services might be chosen to act on his behalf. As a consequence, the Secretary’s Deputy would also move up a notch. Likewise, an Assistant Secretary into the Deputy’s position, and so on down the line.

Over the next two years, for various unforeseen reasons, I ended up on several occasions as Secretary for Economic Services. That outcome was a natural development of the costly McKinsey re-organisation of the Secretariat launched by Sir Murray MacLehose. Under that new regime, Policy Secretaries proliferated like mushrooms around some rotting log. An inordinate number of Secretariat officers benefitted from “acting pay” as a result.

During the period immediately after World War II, the

Secretariat had been much leaner and more centralised. All major policy proposals had to be cleared by both the Colonial Secretary and the Financial Secretary before going to the Executive Council for endorsement. Those two top officials, together with the Governor, represented the official voice of the government. They announced policies and answered for them, both within the Legislative Council chamber and before the wider public.

But the rapid rise in population spawned an increasingly complex set of social, economic and technological issues. That resulted in those two top officials becoming quickly overloaded, causing a bottleneck at the very apex of the administration.

In 1963, when I was first assigned to the Secretariat, a post of Deputy Colonial Secretary had already been created to ease the burden of the two top officials. The then Deputy Colonial Secretary, Geoffrey Hamilton, was authorised to clear some of the less controversial policy memoranda for the Executive Council.

By 1975, however, when I was next assigned to the Secretariat, the number of Policy Secretaries had multiplied so greatly that the lines demarcating their responsibilities had become blurred. Sometimes they even overlapped. That situation left ample scope for turf wars, one-upmanship, back-stabbing and ego-skirmishes.

That unhappy prospect was made worse by the steady loss of some of the more talented and level-headed officers due to retirements. Those promoted to fill their shoes were, unfortunately, too often of inferior calibre. That diluted management quality, brought a loss in mentoring capabilities for new officers and eroded the integrity and *esprit de corps* through large parts of the administrative service.

At the same time, the Governor decided in the early 1970s to delegate to Policy Secretaries the authority to put policy papers directly to the Executive Council and to appoint a few of them as members of the

Legislative Council. The Secretary for Economic Services became one of them. The titles and honorifics sounded grand but they came with very little power to make fundamental changes.

The rationale behind such moves was never very clear. Sir Murray was never one to explain his decisions. Perhaps he just wanted Policy Secretaries to be in the legislature to serve as straw men, to take the heat in case a policy proved too controversial or unpopular. I was never much good at reading his mind.

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The Legislative Council of the mid-1970s was a relaxed and clubby sort of place. It was overwhelmingly dominated by males but it had at least two or three women members. Just as in the case of Justices of the Peace, there were two categories of membership — Official Members and Unofficial Members.

The Official ones were senior civil servants like the Chief Secretary or Financial Secretary and heads of major departments. The Unofficial ones were chosen from the ranks of solid citizens who had a reasonable command of the English language. In other words, they were drawn from bankers, doctors, lawyers, educators, commercial tycoons and captains of industry, with the odd community leader from the *kaifong* associations or one of the better-known charities thrown in.

The Unofficials were by and large decent people, who had accepted appointments as a matter of civic duty. They were conscious of their responsibilities to the wider community rather than just serving the narrower interests of their own callings. They regarded their appointments as badges of public recognition and did their best to earn that status. For such selfless work, they naturally did not expect any recompense.

The working arrangements between Officials and Unofficials were cordial, soothed by mutual respect and honest co-operation. If they had differences, they would work them out quietly in the corridors rather than publicly in the chamber. That called for give and take on both sides. It was not difficult because they all came from pretty much the same social and economic circles and shared similar bourgeoisie outlooks.

People also had not been so brash, uncivil and ego-centric back then. Most speeches within the chambers were bland and amateurishly delivered; sometimes platitudinous and soporific. No one spoke with anything resembling the passion and oratorical flourishes of a Demosthenes or a Cicero. The odd hackneyed joke or an over-stretched pun might be the best anyone could expect. If memory serves, the only demand for a division during the 1970s came over a Bill aimed at liberalising abortion laws. Two Catholic members had got slightly hot under the collar over that issue of conscience. The Bill passed any way.

Around 1975, Sir Murray had another public relations idea. He noticed that no matter how hard the government's publicity machine strived to put a gloss on the Legislative Council being representative of Hong Kong's stratified society, it could not quite bring it off. He therefore decided that someone more solidly linked to the "grass roots" should be invited to join, to improve its image. He promptly ordered the Home Affairs Department to come up with names.

The order threw the department into a tizzy. It upturned the traditional way elevation to the upper crust had been done. The Secretariat for Chinese Affairs — the predecessor of the Home Affairs Department — had responsibility since the early days of the colony for keeping tabs on suitable citizens for political advancement. The word "suitable" implied a proven record in public-spirited endeavours, a reasonable command of the English language and no detectable symptoms of political awkwardness or

traitorous inclinations.

In Hong Kong's cut-throat economic environment, it went without saying that any young person seeking to start a small business or to gain a footing in one of the more established professions had to spend many arduous hours simply to keep his or her head above water. There would be no time or energy left for getting involved in clansmen's associations, orphanages, Chinese temples and the like.

By the time a person could afford to engage in civic work, chances were that he or she had already arrived economically and socially, so to speak. Any former grass roots attachments would have been sloughed off, to stand four square among the *nouveaux riches*. It would only be then that a person would be noticed by the department. It was naturally a vicious circle. A genuine grass rooter who remained as one was about as rare as a person with a six-toed foot.

But thanks to the liaison work of an enterprising City District Officer in Kwun Tong, a young man named Michael Sze, one was found. A recommendation duly found its way back to Government House.

The candidate identified was Wong Lam, a former bus driver who had risen through the ranks to become a junior manager at the Kowloon Motor Bus Company. Wong had done voluntary work in running the Kwun Tong Sports Association. That was how the City District Officer came to know him. In spite of limited English, Wong Lam was appointed in 1976 and he soon proved a great success. He distinguished himself not only by working hard but also by being sensible and measured in his comments and pronouncements. He easily gained the respect of his fellow legislators.

One little unforeseen snag did crop up, however. It transpired that Wong Lam was a man of quite modest means. Working for the public good on the Legislative Council presented certain financial difficulties for

him. The Kowloon Motor Bus Company, which had hitherto employed him, could hardly be expected to continue paying his salary when he was spending most of his time on government matters.

Thus it came about that a stipend was introduced for those serving as legislators. In retrospect, it should be for reconsideration whether serving on the Legislative Council should be regarded as a kind of quasi-public service and be paid at the same level as a mid-grade civil servant. If the rewards were too generous, then any jobless person without qualifications or meaningful experience might chance his or her arm at getting selected on the basis of a gift of the gab or a thick skin.

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The ability to meet Sir Murray's demand for a grass roots appointee to the Legislative Council was a vindication of the effectiveness and reach of the City District Officers scheme. It was only because it had an officer with the political nous of Michael Sze in place in Kwun Tong to identify a potential candidate.

A few years earlier, Sze had passed a rigorous recruitment process to become an Administrative Officer. He personified what City District Officers were meant to do by familiarising himself with the problems, aspirations, moods and personalities in Kwun Tong. He proved a thoroughly fine and talented officer and many more like him were needed by the administration.

And yet, in 1973, Sir Murray had issued instructions that the recruitment standards for Administrative Officers should be watered down so that "more bodies" could be found to fill vacant posts. Any less capable officer than Sze would probably not have unearthed a Wong Lam at such short notice. In the art of governance, quality always mattered more than

quantity.

Anyone reflecting upon the Wong Lam episode would no doubt begin to detect certain incongruities and illogicalities in some of the administration's initiatives and policies. For instance, if getting a grass roots person into the legislature was a good thing, why stop at one? The experiment with Wong Lam had been a substantial success. So why not more grass roots members? A fisherman from the people living on fishing junks perhaps, or a female factory worker doing double shifts in one of the colony's growing hive of factories. After all, more than one fig leaf would be required to disguise the unseemliness and exploitative nature of neo-liberal capitalistic politics.

The legislative stipend that had been put in place represented more than what any grass roots person could normally earn. A fisherman might have observations about diminishing fish stock and marine pollution while a female factory worker might comment at first hand on the real impact of International Labour Organisation conventions on protecting women and young persons in industrial undertakings.

The passage of a law in 1972 making Chinese an official second language would also remove the old argument about legislators needing to know English. What was the sense in having two official languages if one had to be restricted for use under certain circumstances? It could well be that many expatriate Official members would be left at sea if people began speaking in Chinese. They would then have to rely on an interpreter, just as most of the population had to do for long decades.

Ever since the founding of the colony, Chinese brought before a court to face allegation for various crimes had to face proceedings conducted in a language alien to them. They could only gain an inkling of what they were up against through court interpreters of limited skill. It was not until 1976 that the first Chinese lawyer managed to get appointed as a

Supreme Court judge. It seemed about time expatriate policy makers got a taste of their own medicine

What Sir Murray's private attitude might have been towards using Chinese as a second official language remains uncertain to this day. For the record, English appeared to have reigned supreme in bureaucratic dealings throughout his watch.

Naturally, facility in the use of any language had to be inculcation through the local educational system. This would require massive massive reform for the existing system was an unholy patchwork of government, private and aided institutions, riddled with histories of religious or political proselytising, and hardly restricted in their choice of language as a medium of instruction. Teaching standards also varied greatly in schools, as did the level of fees being charged.

The system had been overseen for decades by an Education Department headed by expatriates. Yet no systematic attempt had been made to rationalise and regulate such a colonist and lackadaisical system. One of its drawbacks was that students from poorer families would be disadvantaged because they would encounter difficulties gaining access to the better and more expensive schools.

Syllabuses were antiquated and quixotic. The teaching of modern Chinese history, for example, had been suppressed for decades. That might have been an automatic reflex for those in charge of education, built upon their centuries-long imperial policy of dividing to rule. Such an approach hardly encouraged the development of a sense of Chinese identity in the face of economic and political changes looming on the horizon.

My ancestors had always been intimately involved in the problems of education. My paternal great-grandfather has come to the colony as a teacher soon after its establishment whilst my maternal grandfather, Anglican Bishop Mok Shau-Tsang, was massively involved in

providing education in Hong Kong and Kwangtung. A secondary school named after him is still thriving in Tai Po today. My Eighth Granduncle was the owner of a Chinese secondary school in Hong Kong and he had engaged my father to be its headmaster for a number of years.

I myself had been a secondary school teacher for two years but I had not been given much responsibility for dealing with education policies after entering the civil service.

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It was in that semi-befuddled state, disheartened over my own inability to make any significant change to the society to which I belonged, that I found myself appointed as Secretary for Economic Services in June of 1977. Simultaneously, I was made a member of the Legislative Council under Royal Instructions.



Author's first letter of appointment to the Legislative Council
signed by Sir Murray MacLehose under Public Seal.

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I soon discovered that becoming Secretary for Economic Services necessitated my submitting myself to two sets of bureaucratic protocols — one very much out of the public eye and the other on full display.

The hidden one was known as “positive vetting”. It involved a detailed security check on my private and public life, to determine whether I had committed peccadilloes and indiscretions which might render me liable to blackmail and to assess whether any secret information coming across my desk might be leaked to unauthorised persons or politically hostile parties.

I was therefore required to supply the Special Branch with a complete list of my family members, together with their dates of birth, current addresses and occupations. Next, I had to provide full details of the schools and universities I had attended and the qualifications obtained, together with relevant dates. And then my employment history, again with names of employers and dates. Finally, a list of all the clubs, associations and other organisations that I was or had been a member of, again with dates and details.

It was a thoroughly tedious exercise. I suspected what was really required were the names of organisations I had joined in a personal capacity, like the trade union called the Senior Non-Expatriate Officers Association and the Hong Kong Jockey Club. But out of a sense of mischief to inflict as much work as possible on the so-called intelligence apparatchiks, I stuck in all the organisations the government had ever appointed me to, beginning with the secretaryship of the Hong Kong War Memorial Fund Committee.

The list was long indeed, running from membership on the Film Censorship Review Board and the Port Welfare Committee to being the Alternate Hong Kong Representative on the Board of Governors of the Asian Development Bank. I also included my stints on management boards as diverse as those of the Productivity Council, the Export Credit Insurance Corporation, the Tourist Association and the Industrial Estates Corporation.

How that *pot-pourri* of facts demanded of me could possibly determine the likelihood or unlikelihood of my becoming a security risk was beyond me, unless the material was intended to form the basis for later interrogations. Otherwise, they might just as well have resorted to reading tea leaves or the markings on a tortoise shell.

Curiously, no demand was made for me to supply a list of my close associates or bosom friends, although both Mike Clinton, the Deputy Colonial Secretary, and the Defence Secretary had known for years I had been having regular social contacts with various members of the decidedly left-leaning Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce.

Since I had not been asked about personal relationships, I felt I should be as reticent as possible. What could I have said about my patriotic journalistic mentor, Hon-Kit, and his wife Frances, for example, whose whereabouts had been a mystery to me for more than 28 years? And what of all those damsels I had been consorting with during my search for a wife? Neither did I want the Special Branch intruding into the lives of my *mah-jong* playing partners. It would certainly have been a betrayal of the confidences of friendship if I were to pass on to third parties their opinions and private thoughts. And particularly to operatives of some shadowy foreign intelligence outfit.

The efficacy of the methods used by such operatives had always appeared dubious to me. They often seemed unable to see beyond their own noses. How else to explain away such notorious cases like Burgess and Maclean and the Cambridge Five?

My own experience while undergoing the much lower level of vetting to join the Administrative Service had already demonstrated their ineptness. No one appeared to have taken any notice of my paternal grandfather's active involvement in the 1911 Revolution to overthrow the Ching Dynasty. Nor did anyone raise a question about my mother's work

in the Canton office of Borodin, the Russian Comintern agent sent to China in the early 1920s. Of more recent vintage were the number of meals I had shared with the Soviet Assistant Cultural attaché in London's Chinatown. The least said I could get away with the better.

Experiences later on in my civil service career only provided more evidence of their general incompetence. I shall reveal details of those sorry episodes in a subsequent chapter of this book.

Shortly after I had supplied the information demanded, two middle-aged Chinese Special Branch officers asked for an appointment to see me at my office. For a moment, I was fearful they might ask for the names of political and sexual associates.

The honey trap was a staple in espionage. Few red-blooded males could resist the temptations of a beautiful woman for long. Men could often become just putty in the hands of a real beauty. My father had been a sucker for one for most of his life and in all probability I must have inherited a goodly batch of his genes. Before the officers showed up, therefore, I made up my mind I would refuse to cooperate on questions about my relationships with either women or close friends.

Each individual had to retain certain parts of his life as private and sacred. Governments should not be allowed to gain access to them in the name of national security or some other high-sounding purpose. If the Hong Kong authorities insisted upon my divulging all aspects of my private life, then it could go and find someone else to be the Secretary for Economic Services.

It transpired the Special Branch officers only wanted to ask a few supplementary questions on matters of no great moment. They then went away, apparently satisfied with my answers. I assumed I had passed because I had not been abruptly tossed out of the post.

As an aside, there had been strong gossip in Hong Kong that

when Philip Haddon-Cave was appointed Financial Secretary in 1971, he steadfastly refused to submit himself to positive vetting. One could only guess at why he should have taken that stance. Nonetheless he did acquire a knighthood, which came with the office, and was later promoted to Chief Secretary.

As another aside, it might be worth recording that in 1993, when Mrs. Anson Chan was the first Chinese to be appointed as Chief Secretary, there was still an attempt to limit her access to secret documents on the grounds she had not been positively vetted. Why that issue should have arisen in respect of Mrs. Chan when it had not been for Haddon-Cave is something readers will have to draw their own conclusions on.

In somehow sneaking through the positive vetting myself, I still had no illusion I would ever get to see any of those Whitehall communications marked “For British Eyes Only”. But I did get to see a number of “Top Secret” documents, including a memo from the Commissioner of Police once every few months restricted to only the Chief Secretary, the Financial Secretary and the Secretary for Economic Services.

That memo listed the names of society notables currently under investigation by the police for alleged criminal activities. I imagined the three recipients of the memo were being alerted because they must have been deemed the most likely to officiate at ribbon-cutting and other business and community functions. It would not have looked right if one of them had been caught on camera clinking champagne glasses with a suspect only to have the culprit appear soon afterwards in handcuffs and charged with some serious crime.

Some of the names on the list surprised me. I was acquainted with a handful of them, though none had been a personal friend. So far as I could recall, the majority of those named were never actually charged or prosecuted, possibly due to insufficient evidence to prove crimes beyond

reasonable doubt.

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The second protocol I had to go through before I could take my seat in the Legislative Council was to publicly swear allegiance to the British Crown. That did not represent any philosophical or political impediment for me. While some diehard anti-colonialists might regard taking such an oath as an act of collaboration, I did not feel that way.

Although I was a Chinese nationalist of the small “n” variety and did not relish having to work for foreign masters in an alienated piece of my own country, I had already sold my toss when I signed up to become an Administrative Officer.

So far as I was concerned, the Chinese government had accepted the occupation of Hong Kong as a problem left over by history, to be tackled when “the time was right”. Additionally, in 1958 the Chinese Premier, Chou En-Lai, had elaborated to the then British Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan, through private channels that any attempt by Britain to turn Hong Kong into a self-governing dominion like Singapore would be considered by China as “a very unfriendly act”. In other words, China was prepared to see the city remaining a British colony until it considered the time appropriate for dealing with the issue.

Those unambiguous official Chinese declarations were good enough for me. I thought that any attempt by an individual citizen to buck that geopolitical reality would be pointless. It would be as idiotic as a Swiss Guard sacrificing his life for the Bourbons by defending a staircase in the Tulleries.

Furthermore, Britain had undertaken before the United Nations to rule all non-self-governing territories under the Union Jack in the

interests of the people of those territories. In 1972, however, just as soon as China was admitted into the United Nations, the country insisted that Hong Kong and Macau be deleted from the United Nations list of colonies, making clear it would never countenance independence for either territory. Britain did not object to the Chinese move. So long as Britain kept broadly to its stated intentions, I saw little difficulty in keeping my oath of allegiance to the British Crown.

History has shown that even with the best will in the world, conflicts of interest between the metropolitan powers and colonies would inevitably arise. When Hong Kong became more industrialised, for example, its textile exports grew by leaps and bounds, threatening jobs in the mills of Lancashire. The British government could hardly ignore the complaints of its own voters. So restrictions had to be placed on the importation of Hong Kong textiles. But Hong Kong textile workers also had to make a living. So some appropriate level of restriction had to be worked out to satisfy both parties. That sort of occurrence was common in many other areas of inter-governmental relationships as well.

Sir John Cowperthwaite, as the Financial Secretary of the time, had fought legendary battles with Whitehall over such matters as cost-sharing for stationing the British garrison in Hong Kong and the Whitehall requirement for the colony to keep its reserves in Sterling when that currency was prone to instability and devaluation.

I myself, following another example set by Sir John, had had repeated tussles with London in the sphere of civil aviation landing rights. The approach I had adopted throughout was that I was being paid by Hong Kong taxpayers and it was my duty to fight for the best interests of the colony.

The one qualm I had over serving on the Legislative Council was that I would be placed in the unwelcomed limelight. While some of

my colleagues might well enjoy that sort of attention, it went against my own grain. I much preferred remaining the traditional civil servant, faceless and anonymous, operating behind the scenes to serve up the most workable options I could think of for my political masters.

But in today's world of spin, propaganda, expediency, half-truths, total lies and the sped up nefarious engineering of consent, it is very difficult for a civil servant to remain somehow untarnished.

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During the course of 1978, at the personal level I had to have one of those awkward conversations every father had to conduct with his son. No, it was not about the birds and the bees; rather it was about financing a university education of his choice.

My eldest son, Tien-Kuen, was completing his secondary education at the time and he expressed a desire to study architecture. He was the most intelligent of my three sons. But he had also inherited from me a streak of stubbornness and from his mother a disinclination to accept any opinion at variance with his own.

A couple of years earlier, it had been necessary for him to choose whether to enter the art stream or the science stream in secondary school. He favoured the science stream, simply because his maternal grandparents had planted in him the notion he should aim to become a doctor. They had encouraged that idea to console him over his frequent illnesses as a child. They said becoming a doctor would enable him to look after himself.

My observations told me that Tien-Kuen was not suited to medicine or to any other scientific field. He did not have that attitude of systematic doubt that was required. Moreover, he was of a squeamish

disposition. He would panic at the sight of blood. Even the squawking of chickens frightened him. I doubted if he could handle the dissections of frogs and other small animals in biology classes.

I felt that the art stream would be more suitable for him. He was naturally fond of music, painting and reading. I suggested the art stream for him but he would not hear of it. So I allowed him to proceed as he had wanted. After three or four months, however, he found he indeed could not cope with the requirements of the science stream. He was forced to switch back to the art stream.

Against that background, his stated desire to study architecture also struck me as misguided. In an era when choking Stygian mega-cities were all the rage across the globe and when architects had to be largely in thrall to profit-gouging developers, there left little scope for architectural creativity. To my way of thinking, mega-cities were to people what carnivorous flowers were to insects. They both lure victims into their midst before devouring them.

But I feared that if I attempted such an exposition, my son would take it as another pouring of cold water on his choice of subject. He was, after all, still in his teens and there was every prospect that his mind had not been finally made up.

So instead of talking about any of the dehumanising uglinesses in modern urban life and the progressive abandonment of thousands of years of Chinese architectural traditions, I just said: “University should be no problem. There’s a fairly respectable architectural faculty at one of the local universities. That should do nicely.”

“I want to study in America,” Tien-Kuen interjected quickly.

“But why? What can you learn there that you cannot learn here? If you’re intending to practise here, local knowledge will be very important.”

“Haven’t thought that far ahead,” my son replied. “I just want to study in America. You studied there; why shouldn’t I?”

“Yes, I did study there. But I did it off my own bat. My father did not spend a single cent on me. I can support you for university locally but I can’t afford financing studies in America.”

Tien-Kuen turned sullen. “You’re being very unfair, Dad,” he countered. “How can you say you can’t afford to send me to America when you can afford to lavish money on keeping racehorses? Isn’t a son’s education more important than keeping racehorses?”

I had not expected that line of attack. It jolted me a little. But because of his predisposition to see things only from his own point of view, there were things that needed to be aired sooner or later. The present seemed as good a time as any. So I took a deep breath and plunged ahead.

“When a man makes an assertion,” I began, “he ought to be sure of his facts. It’s true I’ve been keeping racehorses in partnership with Uncle Fung. But if you had investigated the nature of my hobby more thoroughly, you would have discovered that I never spent a penny on it. The reason is that I’ve been lucky enough to draw two good racing propositions. And I have also been prudent enough in managing them in such a way as to derive a small stream of legitimate income from them. I can show you the accounts I’ve kept for Uncle Fung, if you wish. Without that additional income, my financing even your university studies locally would have been a challenge.

“There is another factor you may not be aware of. Your grandfather has moved into a home for senior citizens in Singapore. I, along with some of my siblings, have to chip in each month to see that he can live out the autumn of his life in reasonable comfort. After that and our normal household outgoings, there’s not much left in a civil servant’s salary.

“It’s also true, I have to admit, that if forced to it, I could dig into savings and borrow money for you to study in America. But that would be at the expense of your brothers. When the time comes for them to go to university, there will be nothing left. As a father, I have to be even-handed. I cannot ignore their interests. Nor my own. After retirement, I will no longer be entitled to live at Palm Court with a highly subsidised rent. Where would I find the money to put a roof over my own head?”

I paused deliberately, to give Tien-Kuen an opportunity for counter-arguments. But he only looked down glumly on the floor and said nothing. I had little financial room to manoeuvre but I suspected Tien-Kuen, being quite intelligent, had more than one strand to his strategy.

When he remained sullen, I summarised the existing position. “I’m sorry I can’t meet your expectations,” I said. “I wish it were otherwise. But I really believe it is better for you to attend university here, where our family has had its roots for the last four generations. The young always think the grass is greener elsewhere. That’s often an illusion. If you insist on studying in America, then all I can give you is roughly what it would cost me if you were studying here, plus some pocket money and a small additional sum for incidentals. You’ll have to find the rest yourself, through gaining a scholarship, getting a bank loan, doing some part-time work or whatever. That’s the best I can do. Please think it over.”

Tien-Kuan nodded and our conversation ended.

A few weeks later, Tien-Kuen told me he would accept my terms. He said his maternal grandparents had agreed to make up the difference.

That outcome was pretty much what I had anticipated. I did not know — and did not ask — how Tien-Kuen had sold that issue to his grandparents, then living in Dallas in Texas. He had always been their

favourite grandchild. Having secured their backing, he accordingly headed for Texas the following year.

But, as I had anticipated, he did not end up studying architecture at all. He went in for linguistics instead and afterwards worked in academia in America and elsewhere.

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At the beginning of 1979, I did another stint as Secretary for Economic Services and that made me an *ex officio* member of a powerful Secretariat body known as the Land Development Policy Committee. Land had to be at the heart of all major Hong Kong developments because land was a scarce commodity. The committee was chaired by the Secretary for the Environment. Other important players, like the Director of Public Works and the Finance Branch, were also on it.

At a meeting of the committee, a paper was presented suggesting approval for engaging consultants to study the feasibility of installing a reverse osmosis plant to augment the colony's water supplies. Reverse osmosis was then a technology just coming on stream, purportedly able to turn sewage into potable water.

Water had always been a critical resource for Hong Kong. When rainfall became erratic and drought conditions prevailed in 1955, piped water supplies had to be rationed to four hours every second day. It got even worse in 1963 and 1967, when supplies came for only three hours once in four days! Those had been very distressing experiences. In addition, the city had one of the highest per capita consumption of water for comparable cities in the world.

Therefore, to ensure adequate supplies, the administration began a programme of building reservoirs like those at Plover Cove in

1960 and at High Island in 1969. But with the rapidly expanding needs of both the population and the industrial sector, it proved a losing battle. Suitable areas for reservoirs and catchment areas were running out.

Additional supplies, of course, could be pumped over from across the border. But a section of the administration could not reconcile itself to the decline in Britain's power. Moreover, framed by the adversarial attitudes spawned by the Cold War, it was strategically abhorrent to rely wholly on a Communist regime for a commodity as critical as water. Even for rice, a quota had been imposed to limit importation from China, in spite of such a move being contrary to the free market principles of capitalism.

The rice quota was actually just a flea bite so far as the Chinese were concerned. They had so many other levers of power to manipulate — if they were so inclined. This was particularly the case since they enjoyed dominant positions in respect of other daily necessities like fruit, vegetables, eggs, poultry and meats.

Nonetheless, an agreement in respect of water was somehow reached with the Chinese in the early 1960s, for them to supply water from the East River. The negotiations must have been confidential because I could not recall any account about them appearing in the media. I also did not know who had led the British side because I was not in the civil service at that time.

It transpired subsequently that the Chinese had been more than willing to supply water free of charge, for they regarded the people of the colony as compatriots. But the British insisted upon paying, lest the Chinese exploited the gift of water for propaganda purposes.

I suspected the leader of the British side must have been an expatriate, for he apparently had taken no account of the inauspicious funereal implications of “buying water.” In ancient times, it was required

of the eldest son of a family to fetch water to personally cleanse the body of his father before burial. He would draw water from some clear stream or spring nearby and make some symbolic payment for taking the water. So the act of buying water evoked rather unpleasant connotations.

Sometimes I could not help reflecting how two human beings, not tied up in the straitjackets of protocols and hubris of two opposing political and economic systems, would have handled a neighbourly gesture of a gift. Within Chinese culture, the only appropriate way of responding to a gift would be to accept it with due courtesy and to offer a similar gift in return. It had to be bad form to turn it into an arm's length commercial transaction.

The two human beings would also be one people, bound by ties of blood and common modes of behaviour. Hardly a single family in Hong Kong would be without relatives in Kwangtung Province and vice versa. Although governments could only be operated by individuals, it appeared that when they operated as officials, they could only bring out the worst qualities in the human personality. To coexist harmoniously implied the building of trust, not the creation of fears and suspicions. I supposed until mankind learn that, the world would continue to be in its present mess.

In any case, a deal was eventually done for initially buying 5,000 million gallons of water a year. Later the amount was increased and today China is regularly supplying in excess of 70% of the water required by Hong Kong. However, suspicions about the Chinese still bubbled on regardless. Those fears caused the administration to build as an experiment the world's largest desalination plant near Tuen Mun. The plant became operational in 1975 but it soon proved economically unviable. It was mothballed, then dismantled and finally sold off to a Middle Eastern country.

* * *

It was against such a history that the proposal for a feasibility study for a reverse osmosis plant at Tseung Kwan O was tabled before the Land Development Policy Committee in 1979. The plant was projected to eventually supply 10% of the colony's water needs

The Secretary for the Environment then serving as chairman of the LDPC was a portly expatriate with thick rounded shoulders and rather loose and flabby jowls. He spoke with a slight stutter. He had risen to high office on a talent which I singularly lacked — the ability to agree always with the predilections and opinions of his superiors.

When I read the paper before the committee, several thoughts crossed my mind. First, feasibility studies, particularly on expensive projects, had a peculiar way of turning into highly recommended and thoroughly worthwhile projects after such studies. Great caution was therefore needed in examining them. I feared the reverse osmosis plant might turn into another expensive white elephant, just like the desalination plant.

Secondly, the project was not expected to come on stream till well after the New Territories lease had expired in 1997. Thirdly, no matter what the scientific evidence might be, the Hong Kong public would not take kindly to the notion of drinking reconstituted sewage. And finally, there was no mention in the paper of the Chinese position over supplying water. Even after the reverse osmosis plant had become functional, it would only meet 10% of the city's water requirements, against what was then being supplied from the East River.

So when discussions opened on the subject, I asked why the option of simply asking the Chinese for more water had not been included for consideration in the paper.

“We did ask the Chinese but they have refused to supply us any more than the current amount,” the Secretary for the Environment replied.

“Then that should be stated in the proposal, for that would constitute a powerful argument for proceeding with this study,” I said.

The Secretary for the Environment then half-mumbled his agreement.

But I was actually quite astounded by his revelations. I had no responsibility for dealing with the Chinese on an official level on any subject whatsoever. The normal channel was between the Political Advisor and the New China News Agency, which served as the *de facto* Chinese diplomatic mission in Hong Kong. But I found it hard to believe that the Chinese would refuse to supply more water. Something had to be seriously amiss.

If such a request had indeed been refused, then it could be a harbinger of some bigger and more serious move against the city. Of course, it could also be just a local aberration, like in 1962, when a regional commander decided to withdraw a Peoples Liberation Army unit from guard duties along a section of the China-Hong Kong land border for other purposes. That led to thousands of Chinese immigrants charging across that stretch of the border, to create chaos on the Hong Kong side. In either eventuality, I became deeply worried, though I could not figure out the kind of future in store. In my state of speculative ignorance, I decided it best to keep my apprehensions to myself.

* * *

The moment I got back to my office after the LDPC meeting, I rang my friend and favourite *mah-jong* playing partner Ip Yeuk-Lam. Ip was the long-standing Vice-President of the left-leaning and powerful

Hong Kong Chinese General Chamber of Commerce. He had superb mainland connections because he was a prominent member of the Kwangtung Peoples Congress.

“Yeuk-Lam, I need you to do something urgently for me,” I said over the phone. “Please contact your connections in Canton and see if you can sniff out whether there is some concerted political move afoot against Hong Kong.”

“What’s making you think so?” Yeuk-Lam asked.

“I’ll come to your office after work and explain more fully. But please take your soundings as soon as possible.”

* * *

“Everything’s smooth as a mirror; can’t find the slightest ripple of anything brewing,” Yeuk-Lam said, when I arrived at his office later.

“What’s this all about?”

I then told him what had transpired at the LDPC that morning.

“Sounds quite implausible,” Yeuk-Lam said, after I had finished my narrative. “I can double-check with Canton again tomorrow and touch base with the New China News Agency as well. If a request has been made, it should go through the NCNA; and if it had been refused, I would certainly have heard about it.”

“Please do that. Something is beginning to smell here. Let’s meet for lunch tomorrow, to see what else you might find out.”

* * *

Over lunch, Yeuk-Lam confirmed that all his sources had denied having ever received any request from the British for increased

water supplies. “Why this reverse osmosis?” he asked. “There’s already a pipeline in place, complete with pumping stations. More water is no problem at all. What are the British playing at?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But something funny’s going on. The current chairman of the LDPC is an intellectual lightweight. He has neither the wit nor the guts to pull a stunt like this off his own bat. He must have had a nod from higher up, perhaps from Whitehall, if there’s a British consortium behind the project.”

“Why not challenge him to come clean?”

“How? I can’t tell a senior colleague to his face he has lied about the Chinese refusing to give further supplies without producing compelling evidence. And I cannot use the facts you have given me without getting into serious trouble for breaching a host of Security Regulations. I’m not authorised to have dealings with left-wing organisations, let alone Chinese officialdom. Proceedings before the LDPC are also strictly confidential. I could be roasted alive for disclosing them. My main concern is to see this matter properly discussed and assessed and not to have public money wasted on another hare-brained scheme. And so long as Hong Kong remains lacking in good investigative journalists with a nose for sniffing out government secrets, such issues will forever remain hidden.”

We discussed several ways of trying to get around the problem of disclosing the Chinese position without revealing the unorthodox way I had come by my information. But no story we could concoct seemed very convincing or plausible. Eventually, Yeuk-Lam asked: “Are you friendly with S.Y. Chung?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied. “Known him for years.”

Dr. S.Y. Chung was the senior Unofficial member on the Legislative Council. He was a mechanical engineer by training and had

become an important industrialist. He had worked tirelessly for years to improve the welfare and livelihood of the Hong Kong people. In recognition of his efforts, he had been made a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1975 and had recently been awarded a knighthood by the Queen.

“S.Y. has a number of good friends in the General Chamber,” Yeuk-Lam said. “How about we organise a small and cosy dinner to celebrate his knighthood? You and a senior member of the NCNA, both known to him, could be invited to join in. It could then be represented that the two of you fortuitously stumbled into a conversation about water supplies from China during dinner. Would that work?”

I thought for a moment. “It just might,” I replied.

And so it came about that a few evenings later I attended a dinner party at the Chinese General Chamber Club to celebrate S.Y.’s knighthood. Mr. Ki Fung, the Deputy Director of the New China News Agency also attended. It was indeed a small party, consisting of no more than eight or nine people. Yeuk-Lam arranged it so that Mr. Ki and I would be seated next to each other.

I ought to make clear at this point that neither S.Y. nor any of the other participants — except Yeuk-Lam — had the slightest inkling of what Mr. Ki and I were up to.

* * *

When I got back to my office the following morning, I wrote what was known as a confidential “loose minute” to the Governor, routing the message via the Political Advisor.

The Political Advisor of the time was Mr. David Wilson, who later became Lord Wilson, after serving a stint as Governor of Hong Kong.

I said in the minute that I had attended a private dinner party the previous evening and happened to find myself seated next to Mr. Ki Fung, the Deputy Director of the New China News Agency. After a few drinks, I could not resist complaining to Mr. Ki about China's meanness in turning down Hong Kong's request for some extra supplies of water.

The Secretary for the Environment had stated at a recent meeting of the Land Development Policy Committee that the Chinese had refused to supply extra water. That had been the justification given for a proposal to engage consultants to consider the feasibility of constructing a reverse osmosis plant in Hong Kong.

Mr. Ki had reacted with astonishment to my remarks, I reported. He responded categorically that no request for extra supplies of water had ever been received from the British. Should such a request be made, China would certainly deal with it very sympathetically.

I, of course, had no responsibility for communicating with the Chinese or for maintaining local water supplies. It appeared to me that there might have been miscommunication or misunderstanding somewhere along the line. It might perhaps be in the public interest for whoever was responsible for such matters to investigate further and to seek clarification, following up with Mr. Ki if necessary, I concluded.

Neither the Political Advisor nor the Governor acknowledged the receipt of my minute or replied to it. But I nevertheless had gained my objective. Shortly afterwards, the proposal for engaging consultants for a feasibility study on installing a reverse osmosis plant in Hong Kong was dropped. A new agreement was instead completed with China for supplying increased quantities of water to Hong Kong.

I have recently heard rumours that the possibility of constructing a reverse osmosis plant in Hong Kong has again surfaced. Many circumstances must have changed since 1979, not the least of which would be the increased pollution of the waters of the East River. It might still be worth considering whether it would be more beneficial to Hong Kong in the longer term to invest in a reverse osmosis plant or to invest in helping the Chinese authorities to reduce pollution in the East River, since that remained the city's main source of water.