

CHAPTER 3

Enter Sir Murray

WHEN I WAS IN THE MIDST of my dialogues with student leaders, Sir Murray MacLehose took over as Governor of Hong Kong in November of 1971. Sir Murray, aged 52, was the first career diplomat to be appointed to that position. Hitherto, Governors had emerged from the administrative ranks of the Colonial Service. Of course, gubernatorial appointments had always been the prerogative of Whitehall and the British government of the day. The millions living in colonies had no say whatsoever over the appointees.

Nonetheless, the decision to parachute in a diplomat to run Hong Kong at a transitional time did raise a few eyebrows, both within the bureaucracy itself and among the general public. Diplomats, by their very nature, were perceived to be talkers rather than doers. Was a talker the right choice at such a crucial juncture? A host of social, political and economic problems was coming to a boil and the termination of the New Territories lease in 1997 was already looming like Banquo's ghost over the territory.

In a sense, a talker was not unreasonable. Some cynic had once defined a diplomat as someone sent abroad to lie on behalf of his country. Talleyrand, that arch diplomatist known during his own era as "the Limping Devil", had asserted that speech had been given to man to enable him to disguise his thoughts. Only a contempt for glory, he added, could create a great man. But then, Talleyrand had also been variously regarded as an opportunist,

racketeer, cynic, turncoat, weathercock and traitor. Where would Sir Murray come to rest among that range of judgements and expectations?

History was far from reassuring. Given the way British diplomats had a whole series of bungled initiatives to their names, like demarcating the McMahon Line in India, the carving up of the Middle East *à la* Sykes-Picot, the unholy mess in discharging the trusteeship in the Palestine Mandate, the ill-conceived conspiracy to seize the Suez Canal — to name but a few. No thinking Hong Kong Chinese could be very sanguine about a diplomat handling the many tricky issues pending the end of British imperial rule.

What was most worrying was that a segment of the British political class, including the so-called China-watchers, still clung to the delusion that British administrative control could be extended over Hong Kong after the end of the New Territories lease in 1997. In the circumstances, locals were unsure whether Sir Murray had been sent to lie on their behalf or to lie *to* them on Britain's behalf.

Sir Murray seemed ill-suited to run an alienated, politically divided and multi-dimensional enclave like Hong Kong. After soaking in the tepid bath of British diplomatic duplicity for the best part of his life, would he countenance the kind of arm-wrestling with Whitehall that Sir John Cowperthwaite had hitherto been doing? Or would Sir Murray, honouring Britain's trusteeship obligations, inject a fresher spirit of cohesion into a society where his predecessors had merely allowed an unsteady status quo to bumble along?

Of course, how to measure "success" often came down to a matter of definition. Churchill had once light-heartedly defined success as the ability to proceed from failure to failure without any loss of enthusiasm. By that sort of definition, British rule over Hong Kong could possibly be considered a resounding success.

Whatever Sir Murray might have been instructed to do or had himself planned to do was unknown. An examination of his record gave little away. He had done some work in China as a vice-consul early in his career and had



Sir Murray MacLehose. Photo: *South China Morning Post*

later served a short secondment to Hong Kong as Political Advisor. In the early 1960s, he had been the Principal Private Secretary to a heavy-drinking George Brown, the then British Foreign Secretary. Subsequently he was appointed first as ambassador to South Vietnam and then to Denmark, both rather middle-ranking posts.

I knew little about the life of diplomats. The accounts I have read about them, penned by the likes of Evelyn Waugh and Lawrence Durrell, and my own limited experiences with them had left me with an unfavourable impression of that entire breed. They struck me rather like ham actors in bad plays, sent on stage to deliver vapid lines from poor scripts or to strike outrageous postures. They appeared overly-attached to pomp and circumstance, often thin-skinned and protocol-ridden. Whether Sir Murray would run true to type or be conspicuously different, I could only wait and see.

Almost at once I got involved with the new Governor at first hand. Donald Luddington asked me to prepare a familiarisation programme for Sir Murray, to acquaint him with some of the specific problems affecting Hong Kong Island.

I drew up a programme which involved the Governor abandoning his gubernatorial car to go walking incognito through some of the seamier backstreets. He could then take in local realities at close quarters, passing himself off as just another foreign Joe doing the rounds. I could show him the older tenement bunk-houses, where accommodation was being rented out on the basis of individual bunk spaces on different levels, one on top of the other. He could also stop to chat with grannies doing piece work on pavements. Or to watch children playing in one of those mean little playgrounds, shoe-horned into the midst of the hostile steel and concrete high-rises spreading like plague through urban areas.

I would, of course, bring along a seasoned liaison officer to augment inadequacies in my own local knowledge, to guard against the Governor inadvertently shaking hands with a local triad boss or one of those madams operating neighbourhood whore-houses advertised, with that Chinese penchant for puns, as “one cage, one phoenix”.

Should Sir Murray grow tired of walking, we could hop onto a bus or tram. He could then feel intimately the presence of the *hoi polloi*, overhear their gripes and inhale their odours of sweated toil. The experience might not exactly be on a par with Emperor Chien Lung travelling in disguise south of the Yangtse but the Governor would at least be moving among the citizenry like a fish in water, as the Chinese Communists consistently recommended to their cadres.

Of course, I did not justify my proposals in such indelicate terms. Nonetheless I was surprised when Government House accepted them without ado.

On the appointed day I waited with my liaison officer at the appointed

place. My heart sank, however, when I saw the Governor approaching. It had nothing to do with the fact he was an imposing and patrician presence, standing at six-foot-three, or that he possessed a slightly comical Bob Hope kind of nose.

What disconcerted me was that the Governor had brought along Lady MacLehose, their bodyguard, a couple of press relations officers, and a government photographer or two. Together with myself and my liaison officer, all that was needed for a lively procession would be the trumpets and cymbals of a Chinese band. I could see at once that my original plan had gone for a burton. The anonymous familiarisation walk was being turned into a multi-photo opportunity for the new man in charge.

I was forced to make impromptu adjustments to the tour but we did get to talk to some lowly citizens and eventually to board a tram, with the entire entourage in train. The government photographers snapped happily away and their handiwork was soon distributed to the media.

A satirist at the *Hong Kong Standard*, going by the pseudonym of Yum Char, subsequently published one of the photographs by adding a mocking speech bubble.

As a public relations exercise, the tour went off well enough. Sir Murray was soft-spoken and courteous. The handful of citizens who got to meet him were amused. But I was unsure whether the Governor took in much about their day-to-day trials or their existential hardships.

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The next initiative undertaken by Sir Murray took me by surprise, giving rise to more apprehension. Early in 1972, he decided to splash out HK\$4.7 million of hard-earned taxpayer money to engage the management consultant firm of McKinsey & Company to review and reorganise the machinery of government. The bureaucratic grapevine was soon filled with agitated chatter



The tram ride. From the left: Sir Murray, Lady MacLehose, myself and the tram conductor.

about the need for “sophisticated forward planning” in “anticipation of future problems”.

Many within the administration had misgivings about so peremptory a decision by Sir Murray, before he had, as it were, even put up his feet to warm his hose at Government House.

That the government machinery was musty and creaky in parts could not be gainsaid. The time I had spent under Sir John Cowperthwaite’s tutelage had given me a healthy scepticism over the efficacy of any long-term planning. Also the absolute necessity for sufficient intellectual resources if plans were to stand a chance of being effectively implemented. But both long-term and short-term plans needed to spell out ultimate goals. The real question to be answered before any re-organisation had to be what the re-organisation was designed to achieve. Airy-fairy talk of greater efficiency was not enough. Greater efficiency to what ends?

For the sake of argument, if the aim was to maintain an unchallenged

occupation, to curb people from upsetting the social order by demonstrating over one thing or another, then McKinsey & Company could not be the right people for the task. Far better to get Israeli consultants with extensive experience in crowd control and in imposing administrative detention without trial or *habeas corpus*.

At the other extreme, if the aim was to prepare the population for reunification with their homeland a quarter of a century down the road, that would involve major political decisions which could not be left to a commercial management company out to make a profit. It would require considerable engagement with local people clued up on local circumstances and a rapid increase in the number of talented local officers capable of implementing policies and operating the actual levers of power.

No doubt HK\$4.7 million would buy a lot of management-speak, complete with a nice collection of organisational charts. But as any experienced manager would know, formal structures counted for very little in practice. It would be the calibre of people occupying the positions of command who would determine how an organisation would function.

Merely tinkering with technical arrangements without a root-and-branch rethink of the entire policy-making structure and taking into account the limited talent available for implementation would not be worth the money. Competent administrators could hardly be conjured out of thin air.

My views, naturally, came from the level of a worm's eye. My niche in the hierarchy was in the mudflats of the lower strata. But there was such a thing as the turning of the worm, which those occupied with theories and high strategies could ignore only at their own peril. Sir Murray's liberal dispensation of public funds at such an early stage of his tenure set me wondering if he had his priorities right. But I kept my reservations to myself.

McKinsey & Company eventually sent three wise men to earn its fees. I had no idea what their brief had been nor whom they had consulted during the course of their work. Had they been asked for the re-organisation to take account of the disharmonies revealed through the Star Ferry riots of 1966, the Cultural Revolution riots of 1967-68, the Diaoyu Tai demonstrations which began in 1970 and were then still on-going, the unprecedented march of the government's own nurses on Government House in 1971 and so on? I never found out.

I would be surprised if they had consulted very many Chinese officers because the top brass at the time had been virtually all expatriates. No local officer headed any of the key Secretariat branches. Certainly the views of a lowly officer like myself were never sought.

Neither did anyone attempt to answer that tantalising question about what the re-organisation was *for*. Without a straightforward answer the whole exercise would be just window dressing, like planting a new flower into the window-box without noticing that part of the window-frame had already been hollowed out by termites. And on closer examination, the new flower might even turn out to be plastic at that.

In 1973, McKinsey & Company duly produced a report grandly entitled: *The Machinery of Government: A New Framework for Expanding Services*. It was supposed to set out how decisions were supposed to be made and acted upon and the delineation of responsibilities between the centre and the front line departments.

One thing came through clearly, however. Before McKinsey there had been only three officers at the Secretary level — the Colonial Secretary, the Financial Secretary and the Secretary for Chinese Affairs. They were supposed collectively to be the voice of government. They were all members of the Executive Council.

After McKinsey, branch heads in the Secretariat were all upgraded to Secretaries, which meant that the voice became less distinct coming through

yet another layer of bureaucracy. Not only would that extra layer provide more scope for bureaucratic in-fighting but it would also insulate the elites further from everyday realities. The people who had been doing those jobs merely continued to do them, but at much enhanced salaries, either on promotion or in acting pay.

A number of them were actually quite mediocre in my opinion, time-servers who had filled the shoes of more experienced and talented men, like Cowperthwaite, Baron and Todd, after they had retired. But less competent successors had advanced nonetheless, like derelict sampans rising with an unseasonable tide. There had been a suspicion in some quarters that they had been the very people upon whom the McKinsey team had relied for material in framing their proposals.

If a stricter ethical standard were to be applied, such people would be in a conflict-of-interest situation and ought to have withdrawn themselves from direct involvement. The management firm was being paid enough to work things out for itself. No one saw fit to raise such an issue.

When the McKinsey report was completed, I was not given a copy nor was one even shown to me. I therefore happily assumed I was considered too insignificant to be concerned with such lofty stuff. But I did subsequently have to resolve certain important matters arising out of that report, matters which the three wise men had neglected to cover.

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Meanwhile, I continued with my assignment to engage with student leaders over the Diaoyu Tai issue. As time went by, it became evident to the students that demonstrations were not going to deter America from its decision to hand over the disputed islands to Japan. America did claim, however, that it was completely neutral in that dispute and that it would be up to the parties concerned to sort out their differences.

The attitude of student leaders by then was turning more ambivalent. Their protests had not secured them the critical mass in support they had anticipated. The political horse-trading at the United Nations, which saw the Communists replacing the Kuomintang, had also muddied the local atmosphere. Yet most student leaders remained bound to their cause.

Perhaps a sense of their mood and defiance could be more easily conveyed if I were to present them again in the form of another made-up conversation with the mythical Kwan.

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The young student leader was more subdued than when we had last met. “We went out and got beaten to make a point,” he said. “But the public did not care enough to rally behind us. How can any patriotic Chinese not react to the Yanks and the Japs trying to steal another bit of our country again?”

“When a man has to struggle daily to feed himself or his family, it takes quite a lot to get him to quit work and forego pay to demonstrate for a distant and insubstantial ideal.” I countered.

“Man cannot live by bread alone.”

“I suspect those who advance such sentiments usually have full bellies. I’ve never known anyone who can stay hungry for very long. I certainly can’t.”

“So you think trying to enlist the masses is a lost cause?”

“Probably,” I allowed. “For the present, at least. But then, there’s always something very beguiling about lost causes. They often seem the only ones worth fighting for.”

“Some of us have argued that way. We felt it our duty to act, to keep the protest going. But we haven’t been able to agree on what to do next. Another mass rally, boycotting classes, a march through the town or something more dramatic.”

“You’d be unlikely to get permission for a march when you didn’t get one

for demonstrating inside Victoria Park.”

“We did, actually. But it came too late. Victoria Park is no longer a problem. Some Urban Councillors have told us they would support our campaign. Even if we fail, we must fail with dignity and not let the Yanks and the Japs get off scot-free.”

“I’m not sure what you mean by failing with dignity.”

Kwan gave me a puzzled look. “It means standing up for a principle, for an ideal, even though it might turn out to be what you’ve called a lost cause.”

“I see. Tell me something: You were at Victoria Park last year and got beaten by policemen with truncheons. Did you find that experience less painful or more satisfactory than, say, being knocked down by a car in an accident?”

“You’re not comparing the same thing!”

“I should have thought that the pain you felt, the bruises, the broken bones, *et cetera*, would have been more or less the same as being knocked down by a car. Yet, if you had been a victim of the latter, you would take pains to avoid it happening again, whereas in the case of the police beatings, you and your friends seem to be seeking more of the same. I’m just trying to understand why?”

“Surely you must see the difference! One is about choosing a side, making a stand; the other’s pure accident.”

“Young people should be more careful over allowing their actions to be driven by myths. There are many situations in life where a person finds himself with no side to choose.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Only what I have been trying to tell you all along. My orders are to dissuade you and your friends from further demonstrations. Nothing more than that.”

“But I thought you were sympathetic to our stand. You promised you would help us.”

“Only if you keep within the law, not to help you stir up trouble.”

“We’re not the ones stirring up trouble. It’s the Yanks and the Japs. They think there’s oil under the seas at Diaoyu Tai. That’s why they want those islands. The Yanks pretend they’re neutral. If a man happens upon a wallet that’s not his and three people claim it, he wouldn’t just hand it over to one of the three and tell them to sort things out themselves. The Yanks know that possession is nine-tenths of the law. So they’re up to no good. If they were really neutral, they would have handed the item to some legal authority or to some disinterested third party to adjudicate.”

I smiled indulgently, slowly shaking my head. “How can you be in a university and yet remain so naive?” I asked. “Nation states are not bound by what’s fair or what conforms with moral scruples. They operate under imperatives like national security, civilising mission, promoting democracy, manifest destiny, high-sounding stuff like that. Their perceived ends justify their means, even though the ends seldom turn out as they have perceived them to be. There are always unforeseen circumstances and unintended consequences. That gives rise to the eternal conundrum over ends and means. Have you read a book called *America’s Strategy in World Politics*, written by a Yale professor shortly after Pearl Harbour?”

“Never heard of it.”

“Ah, another deficiency in our educational system. I suggest you get hold of a copy. Even as World War II was being furiously fought, the professor advocated that America should not beat Japan and Germany too comprehensively, because they would be needed later to counter the rise of China and Russia. He asserted there could be no security in being simply as strong as a potential enemy. To be really secure, a country had to be substantially stronger than any possible enemy.

“His ideas were later adopted by John Foster Dulles as American foreign policy and he became known as the godfather of containment. So you see, that is the way power games are played and how arms races and wars are created.

“Of course, the two Chinese claimants to Diaoyu Tai have not come forward with exactly clean hands. They knew that the Americans had been using one of the islands as a bombing and shooting range. If someone were using part of your property as a firing range, wouldn't you have kicked up a fuss about it? They were playing their own political games. If you want the masses with you, you will have to explain that lapse too.”

Kwan stared at me for a while, and then said: “You're not making this easy for us, are you?”

I shrugged. “You and your friends want to make this a public issue, not I.”

“I'll talk to the others and see what they think. If we arrive at something non-confrontational and legal, would you support our bid?”

I signified my assent. With that Kwan took his leave.

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After each meeting, I reported in writing to Donald Luddington, recording the names of each interlocutor, the gist of our discussions, my assessment of him and likely future developments.

When May of 1972 came around, America handed the disputed islands to Japan, though retaining a large number of highly unpopular military bases on Okinawa. High-level homilies were naturally uttered about the need to settle international disputes in a peaceful manner.

Faced with a *fait accompli*, student activists in Hong Kong were left frustrated and helpless. Eventually, they decided to mount one big, final protest before ending public demonstrations. They decided to gather at Victoria Park, march from there to deliver letters of protest at the American Consulate General in Garden Road and at the Japanese Consulate General in Connaught Road Central, and then to disperse in an orderly manner.

The student leaders appraised me of their plans, stressing that they honestly

wanted the entire show to be conducted legally and without violence and with a minimum of disruption to the general public. The purpose of the march was meant to arouse awareness to the issue. They needed active police assistance, to escort them along the route of the march, to direct motor traffic at road junctions, and to control possible disruptive elements. They also asked for my support in gaining the necessary authorisations.

I questioned them closely on their unity of purpose and their organisation of the event. I agreed with them about the possibility of criminal elements exploiting the occasion to create trouble, such as picking pockets of onlookers or breaking display windows to snatch valuables from shops along the way.

They said that was one of the reasons they were asking for a police escort throughout their journey. They had purposely chosen a Saturday morning, to minimise disruption to normal activities. They had also appointed a large number of security marshals to ensure that the marchers remained disciplined and to proceed at no more than four abreast. The marshals would be charged with overseeing the orderly dispersal of participants afterwards as well.

I asked their intentions should the government refuse their request. They replied they were determined to march regardless, in a peaceful and non-disruptive manner. Should the police refuse their applications or try to disperse them before the march, then the police would have to bear the consequences. None of the participants was out for a confrontation or for getting a criminal record.

When I was convinced of the earnestness and peaceful intentions of the student leaders, I advised them to provide as much detailed information as they could in making their applications, such as the expected number of participants, the routing and duration, the number of security marshals appointed, the likelihood of traffic disruptions and so forth. If they submitted applications in the terms they have described to me, then I would undertake to support them at best I could.

I told Luddington I believed in the stated intentions of the student leaders.

They were motivated largely by patriotic fervour over a matter they regarded as of national importance. Since they represented nothing less than the future leaders of Hong Kong, they ought to be given a chance for a peaceful protest. To deny them again would merely generate further resentments and more social alienation. I strongly recommended that the students be allowed to march legally and to deliver their letters of protest. The Secretary for Home Affairs was receptive to my proposals.

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After the students had filed their applications, the situation was still viewed in some government quarters as being fraught with potential for unrest. That caused Sir Murray to convene a meeting at Government House to discuss the differences of opinion from different departments.

In attendance at the meeting were the Commissioner of Police, the Director of the Special Branch, the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Deputy Director of Urban Services, the Secretary for Home Affairs and myself. It went without saying that I was the only Chinese and also the most junior.

The Governor invited the Secretary for Home Affairs to present his recommendations. Luddington said that since I had been the one with the closest contacts with student leaders, he would like me to speak on behalf of Home Affairs. I assumed he must have already circulated my recommendations to the rest of the attendees.

I rehearsed my assessments and recommended that the students be granted permission to hold their march. For good measure, I suggested it might remove a bone for future contention if a part of Victoria Park could be designated permanently as a place where people could freely get on their soap boxes and express their opinions, along the lines of Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park. Hong Kong society was becoming more sophisticated, I added, and it would be a good move to give the public an outlet for airing different

points of view.

“Hong Kong’s not London,” the Governor said evenly. His words fell like a guillotine, killing off further discussion on the subject.

Sir Murray was absolutely right, I immediately told myself. My proposal about a Speakers’ Corner was completely unworkable. Wooden soap boxes would be virtually impossible to find in the colony.

The Governor then asked the Commissioner of Police to give his views. The Commissioner said he was opposed to allowing any march. The city was crowded enough already and it was difficult to keep things running smoothly. It would set a very bad precedent if people were allowed to disrupt normal life with marches whenever they chose.

I countered by saying that if the march turned out to be orderly and peaceful, then that might set a good precedent for allowing them.

The Director of the Special Branch said he had intelligence that agitators would be among the marchers, out to cause trouble.

I said if I could have the names of the potential troublemakers, I could get the student leaders to exclude them.

“The intelligence is secret; it cannot be divulged,” the Director of the Special Branch replied.

The Commissioner of Police then set out his plans for handling the situation should the students persist with an illegal march. He would not attempt to stop it or to break it up at the assembly point. But the police, both in uniform and in plain clothes, would be in ample numbers every step along the way, to escort the marchers and to control them. Police cameramen, some posing as journalists, would film the participants, to gather evidence for any future prosecution. Traffic policemen would be posted at every road junction along the route, to direct or unsnarl vehicular traffic and separate marchers from road traffic. Riot police would be on hand to intervene at the first sign of disorder.

I pleaded once more that if the police were prepared to invest so much

manpower in overseeing an illegal demonstration, why not improve the atmosphere by approving the march, while keeping all those security arrangements in place? It would ensure the same degree of order while at the same time not make law-breakers out of the students.

But the Commissioner of Police was adamant that public demonstrations had to be discouraged. The Governor endorsed that strategy without further elaboration.

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I contacted the main student leaders immediately after the Government House meeting. I told them the police intended to deny their application for a march. They would be getting an official rejection shortly. I had spoken up for them but was unable to sway the government. As a civil servant, I had to advise them to abandon the march. But the decision on what to do next was solely theirs to make. They should also be aware that there might be troublemakers out to create disorder.

As I conveyed the news to the students, my heart was tormented by forebodings. The peremptory way the Governor had made his decision seemed a dismal augury for the rest of his tenure. It amounted to a negation in one fell swoop of what his predecessor, Sir David Trench, had visualised for the City District Officer scheme — a people-friendly method for tapping into grass root opinions and taking them into account. What was the point of gathering public sentiments if they were to be flicked off like so much dust from a riding jacket?

In the event, the students decided to stick to their plans. Thousands gathered at Victoria Park and marched four abreast with banners and shouted slogans to the two consulates general to deliver the letters of protest. But there was not the slightest disorder along the way, no traffic chaos and no agitators stirring up trouble or engaging in thievery. After delivering the

letters of protest, the demonstrators dispersed quickly and peacefully, as their leaders had indicated they would.



Students march to the US and Japanese consulates. Photos: *South China Morning Post*

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During the following week, a debriefing session involving the same cast of officials was called at Government House. Most of those present soon began patting themselves on the back, remarking on how smoothly and free of trouble the whole incident had been. The Commissioner of Police and the Director of the Special Branch seemed particularly pleased with themselves.

I could sense that the whole meeting was heading towards sweeping the illegal procession under the carpet. I therefore seized indiscretion by the throat and without any prior authorisation from Luddington tossed a stone into that developing pool of complacency.

“Sir,” I said, addressing the Governor, “I am the most junior and least experienced officer here. I am not familiar with how things ought to proceed in a situation like the present one. But it seems to me that the law has been breached on a grand and blatant scale. The police have gone to a great deal of trouble to have witnesses in place throughout the march and to collect photographic evidence of the law-breakers in the act. Would it not now be the duty of the Director of Public Prosecutions to consider charges against the offenders? Otherwise, the rule of law would fall into disrepute. More importantly, the young and the immature might draw the wrong lesson from government’s inaction. They might conclude that if they could muster the numbers, they could defy the government. This would be a very dangerous development. One day, it might become necessary for blood to be spilled to maintain public order.”

A stunned silence enveloped those sitting around the gubernatorial conference table. It was as if I were a drunk who had somehow staggered into a meeting of the Ladies Temperance League. Nobody made a sound, not even Luddington.

After a pregnant moment, the Governor stood up and went back to his desk,

signifying that the meeting had ended. As I watched all my seniors trooping out of the Governor's office, I could not unfrown my face. An inability to disguise my feelings has been one of my consistent shortcomings. I suppose that was one of the reasons why the hard-drinking Assistant Cultural Attache at the Soviet Embassy in London did not offer to put me on the KGB payroll as an informant or agent.

Of course I had tossed my stone deliberately, though not out of sheer mischief or because I did not get my way. I did so because I believed that public officials should be held accountable for their decisions, particularly when they impacted upon matters of public interest.

The march had been heavily covered by the media and watched by tens of thousands along the route. But with the heavy police presence, it was doubtful if very many knew whether it was a lawful or an unlawful event. The media never raised that matter as an issue nor did they probe into that point afterwards. The thousands of students who had participated, however, knew beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt that they had taken part in an illegal event and got away with it.

To my way of thinking, no impression should be left among them that, if they could muster sufficient numbers, the law could be broken with impunity. The law might be an ass but it was the law and it should be upheld till it was changed.

The government should have foreseen the possibility of thousands of students taking part, regardless of whether the procession was legal or illegal. It could have made a virtue of necessity by granting permission for it to be held, but with strict conditions attached. There was no realistic possibility of sentencing thousands of students to two years' gaol for illegal assembly, as happened during the 1967 riots, or of giving each of them a criminal record, as in the case of Mok Chiu-Yu. The government had chosen to ban the march. It should be made to justify its decision in public.

My intervention at Government House was intended to remind the

government that it, too, had to abide by the law and to enforce it. My hope was that I could shame the government into mounting a few prosecutions against some of the student leaders. Should that happen, then I was sure I would end up in the witness box to give my account of the dialogues prior to the march.

I did not think it possible for a court to convict any student leader because each could show he had acted in good faith in exercising their right of free speech while avoiding any disturbance to the public order. They had followed all the rules, consulted with government officials beforehand and had sought permission appropriately. And whatever the judicial outcome, I felt sure that in the court of public opinion the government would be the one in the dock.

But the government decided not to prosecute, preferring to hide its decision away from public examination. Therefore I had failed twice to get the right of peaceful assembly and protest accepted as a normal for the colony.

I nonetheless gained an emerging insight into how Sir Murray intended to exercise his power as Governor after those two Government House meetings. He intended to be autocratic, to shoot from the hip, as one of my colleagues had described it.

During his years as a diplomat, he could not have imagined getting anything remotely resembling the kind of authority he could exercise as a Governor. It might have gone to his head. I have heard it said that power was something like measles. The later in life the disease caught a person, the more dangerous and itchy it became. The first inclination of someone affected would be to scratch, without realising that the more it was scratched the worse it would become. In my humble opinion, Sir Murray gave me every indication he was a scratcher.

In retrospect, it might also be said that Sir Murray had gathered around himself too many people who thought like him, that is, people who would rather swallow convenient half-truths than masticate slowly upon harder and

more complicated truths. Such an attitude at the top was not a very happy augury for the colony.

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Following the imbroglio of an illegal procession through the city without attracting due punishment, the students wound down in high spirits. They were delighted they had got the better of government. They soon went back to their studies.

I also returned to the more mundane duties of a City District Commissioner in my office at Hysan Avenue. With the end of the demonstrations over Diaoyu Tai, my proposals for a dedicated official to deal with student and youth affairs must have been quietly filed away in some dusty Secretariat pigeon-hole. Certainly no long-term plan for keeping tabs on the sentiments and aspirations of future generations of Hong Kong students emerged out of the McKinsey reorganisation.

One day, some months later, I was surprised when Donald Luddington turned up at my office without warning. After chatting with my staff and giving them a pep talk, he handed me a sheet of paper. He said it was a draft confidential assessment on me, the kind senior officers were required to make each year on those working directly under them. He said that before submitting his assessment, he wanted to know whether I considered his comments to be fair and balanced.

His approach was novel to me. During my 11 years in the civil service, none of my previous superiors had ever asked me to comment on their assessments. David Baron and David Alexander merely told me each year they had given me “a good report” and that was it. Mike Clinton and Sir John did not even go that far. They were both extremely shy and the prospect of telling someone to his face about his quirks and shortcomings must have been very off-putting for them. I could only surmise their reports had been

fairly satisfactory because I got accelerated promotion to Staff Grade C.

After touching upon the standard bureaucratic qualities of diligence, initiative, analytical capabilities, clarity of submissions, leadership potential and so forth, Luddington's draft concluded as follows: "Wong sets very high standards but he often expects too much from his colleagues. In the area of policy formulation and execution, his solutions sometimes veered towards the radical and unconventional, perhaps suggestive of the outlook or temperament of a loner."

The draft brought into relief the differences between how a superior might see a subordinate and how a subordinate might see himself. I was not really trying to set particularly high standards; I was merely trying to put into practice some of the basic notions I had of how a public official ought to act.

I fully recognised that different people had different abilities which they could exercise at a higher or lower level. It was a matter for individual decision according to their own circumstances — except when they choose to work for the civil service.

Anyone making that particular choice ought to be committed to the public good. If his salary was inadequate or his treatment unfair, he had the choice of quitting or struggling for change within the system. Should he stay, then he had to work to the utmost within his assigned sphere of responsibility. He would not be entitled to use poor treatment as a justification for performing his duties half-heartedly. It was that simple.

Where I myself was concerned, I had not the slightest doubt my first loyalty belonged to the Hong Kong taxpayers who paid my salary. But I was also conscious I was a British Crown servant who had sworn allegiance to the Queen. How should I balance those two demands? What if some high British official required me to act against what I conceived to be the best interests of the people of Hong Kong? Should I obey?

My grandfather had also been a British Crown servant. But he had no such

conflicts of loyalties. He was a medical doctor. His personal priority — apart from his medical work at a distant outpost of someone else's empire — was to raise funds among overseas Chinese to support a revolution in China itself.

I was not so lucky. The Chinese blood in me resented having to live under foreign occupation and letting outsiders decide on how Chinese people ought to live.

On the other hand, many Westerners had touched my life and most of them had been thoroughly likeable and decent — beginning with my English godfather right through to my secondary school English teacher Miss Fox, the Australians who had welcomed me as a refugee and my many American university classmates. Those experiences softened my distaste for foreign impositions, although the occasional white racist readily re-ignited my resentments.

A certain vague undercurrent of guilt nagged me as well. My paternal grandfather had committed himself to a cause and had stuck to it throughout his life. My maternal grandfather had found a religion and had given everything he had towards its furtherance. I had done neither; I had often teetered on the brink of indecision.

When Hon-Kit and Frances decided to return to China “to do some good” in 1949, I could have gone back with them but I vacillated instead and that crucial moment was lost.

Could there be something equivocal or questionable about my belated stance on patriotism? Was it intended to make amends, to soothe a guilty conscience or to improve my self-esteem in my own eyes? How could I explain such mixed and confusing feelings to Donald Luddington when I could not be clear about them myself? Admirable boss and decent man though he was, Luddington was also an instrument of the occupation.

In the end, I telephoned him and told him simply that I considered his assessments eminently fair and reasonable. The only suggestion I ventured was that he could save a few words in the final sentence by just describing me

as a maverick. I never discovered whether he accepted my suggestion.

* * *

In the spring of 1973, the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, paid an official visit to Hong Kong. It coincided with the preparations for the Lunar New Year, during which Victoria Park was taken over for a week or so for holding a New Year fair. Sir Alec's programme included a visit to that fair. I was asked by the Governor to take Sir Alec around the stalls and explain the relevance of their offerings for the Chinese community during that festival.

It was an opportunity I greatly relished, for I had previously read an article about Sir Alec which left a considerable impression on me. The article stated that when Sir Alec became Prime Minister in October of 1963, he confessed to facing two sets of problems. The political ones, he reportedly declared, were insoluble while the economic ones were incomprehensible. What an extraordinarily frank thing to say for someone at the helm of a major Western government!

I was not entirely sure whether that account was accurate or whether it was just one of those urban myths put out to obscure the fact that his Prime-ministership was one of the shortest in modern British history. It lasted for just under one year. He nonetheless continued to serve as Foreign Secretary for a number of years thereafter, when the Conservatives held power. And by all accounts he served with great distinction.

Of course, back in 1963 politicians had not been so locked under the strangleholds of public relations minders as at present. They had not yet mastered the dark art of dissembling falsehoods and being economical with the truth.

Against such a background, I was naturally keen to discover for myself whether he had been really so refreshingly frank about his own limitations. If so, he would be a truly remarkable man for whom the ancient virtues of truth

and humility still counted. I wanted to learn from so insightful a man.

Unfortunately, the time I had with Sir Alec was extremely limited, and there were too many photographers trailing after us. I was given little opportunity to ask him the questions I wanted to ask. All I could do was to explain why the Chinese were attached to certain colours, symbols and traditions during the spring festival.

Nonetheless, I came away with the impression — from the questions that *he* asked — that he was a gentleman of great civility, modesty and intelligence. What a great pity the modern-day electoral processes have failed so consistently to produce more office-bearers like him.



Sir Alec Douglas-Home examining a porcelain figurine at the Lunar New Year Fair in 1973.

* * *

Meanwhile, rumours began to circulate in the upper levels of the bureaucracy that Luddington had ran afoul of the Governor. I was too remote from the

power plays in the Secretariat to know the specific details but there was talk of Luddington failing to carry out certain orders because he had considered them unrealistic. I could well imagine that some of the grass root opinions gathered by City District Officers and conveyed upwards might not be to Sir Murray's liking.

The upshot was that Luddington got "kicked upstairs". He vacated the post of Secretary for Home Affairs in May of 1973 to become the Governor of the Solomon Islands. His departure saddened many of his junior colleagues for he had been a thoroughly thoughtful and upright leader, providing a steadying influence not only within the Department of Home Affairs but also more generally within the top echelons of government. He was well-liked by many for being cheerful and cautious, always down-to-earth and approachable, and with an uncommon fund of common sense and humour. He never put on airs and attached no importance to the petty trappings of power.

He stayed in the Solomons till that territory gained independence in 1976. He received a knighthood for being the Governor there and afterwards returned to Hong Kong to head the Independent Commission Against Corruption in 1978, bringing his own brand of moral purpose to the job.

He finally retired in 1980 and chose Easingwold in Yorkshire for his retirement. Some ten years or so later, I and another Administrative Officer who had previously served under him paid him a visit in Easingwold. We found him in fine fettle, still wearing his magnificent handlebar moustache. He passed away in 2009.

* * *

More than four decades have passed since the quarrel over Diaoyu Tai erupted. That problem remains festering today. Chinese and Japanese fishing boats and naval vessels have been regularly engaging in recklessly close encounters with one another. Political leaders of both claimants seemed blinded to the

prospect of a miscalculation or a mishap in such cat-and-mouse activities igniting the fuse for another more deadly conflict.

It speaks volumes about the lack of wisdom in the governance of the world when two Asian neighbours, which had been fighting each other for decades, cannot resolve with fairness and honour the ownership of a few pieces of uninhabited rocks after more than four decades. Instead, jingoistic rhetoric has been on the increase in both the claimant countries.

The dispute has not been helped by outside powers and their complicit media fanning the embers of resentment between the two claimants. Whereas at the start of the quarrel America had declared itself neutral, it is now changing its tune to outright support for Japan's claim and has included the islands under the terms of defence agreements. It was like waving a red cape in the face of a bull and could only sour relationships between those nations for years to come.

The wild optimism of Prince Albert when he spoke of "the realisation of the unity of mankind" at the time of the Great Exhibition of 1851 must appear pretty hollow today. Mankind might have turned itself into some form of technological giant but its moral and ethical orientation remains back in the stone ages.

So far as Hong Kong is concerned, there has been one small consolation arising out of the illegal Diaoyu Tai protests. When David Alexander became the Director of Urban Services, he pursued the idea of a Speakers' Corner at Victoria Park. Today there is a spot where the ordinary person can go and publicly sound off his views, without having to get anyone's permission beforehand.

I imagine it could only be through such slow accumulation of small advances, patiently nursed along by dedicated public officials, that a society can acquire a measure of maturity.

And it is important for those who enjoy civil liberties to cherish and respect them and not to abuse them for trivial purposes.