

CHAPTER 7

Bureaucratic Run-Ins

WHEN I WAS APPOINTED City District Commissioner for Hong Kong in 1971, I was simultaneously appointed a Justice of the Peace. Justices of the Peace came in two categories — official and unofficial. The official ones were essentially senior government officials accepting the appointment as part of their duties; the unofficial ones were made up of solid citizens in business or in the professions, selected for appointment because of their interest in unpaid voluntary work. To become an unofficial one, a person would normally be recommended by either the Secretariat for Home Affairs or the New Territories Administration. Those found to be even mildly anti-colonial in sentiment would be naturally weeded out.

All appointees would be entitled to put the initials JP after their names on calling cards. The public at large often mistook the suffix as some kind of honour. Appointees from the private sector were naturally in no hurry to disabuse anyone of that misconception.

In reality, a JP enjoyed no free ride for that title. He or she had to assume a range of judicial duties. Among the most frequent was the inspection of public institutions like hospitals, orphanages, prisons and the like, to see that they were being properly run. This was to cultivate in the public a perception that impartial community oversight was in place to identify defects and mismanagement.

Inspections were always carried out in pairs, with one official JP accompanying an unofficial one. Although visits were theoretically supposed to be spontaneous and unannounced, they were in fact arranged according to a schedule overseen by the Councils Branch of the Secretariat. The bureaucratic penchant for regularity and system made it easy for most institutions to figure out roughly when a visit might be due. They would then spruce up their institutions in anticipation.

A JP also had a range of other duties, most of which would devolve upon official JPs rather than on the unofficial ones. For instance, during long holiday weekends, when the courts were closed, a police inspector might well turn up at the home of an official JP to request a warrant to confine someone to a mental institution for observation, pending the re-opening of the courts. The JP would need to be fully satisfied that the behaviour of the person in question was such as to merit detention, because the liberty of a citizen was at stake. I had signed such warrants on more than one occasion.

One of my earliest JP visits was to the maximum security prison at Stanley. The regulations of the prison had a provision whereby inmates could demand an audience with visiting JPs for the purpose of lodging complaints. Any prisoner wishing to complain about treatment would then be brought before visiting JPs.

It so happened that an inmate did want to lodge a complaint during my visit. The complainant alleged an unreasonable denial of reading material. In order to remain unbiased, my fellow JP and I deliberately refrained from asking about the crime for which the complainant had been convicted and the length of his sentence.

According to the prisoner, he should have reasonable access to reading material. His choice of reading was a Chinese daily newspaper of leftist inclinations brought to him by his family. However, the authorities had refused to pass him that publication.

I cannot now remember whether the newspaper had been the *Ta Kung*

Pao or the *People's Daily*. It had been one or the other. My JP colleague and I both thought a British prison was a place for punishment and reform, not for altering political inclinations. The newspaper concerned was freely available at street corner news kiosks throughout the colony. So we recommended that, on the face of things, the prisoner ought to be entitled to his newspapers. We recorded our recommendation in a visitors' book set aside for that purpose.

A week or so later, a letter addressed to both visiting JPs was received from the Commissioner for Prisons. He thanked us for visiting Stanley Prison but said it was his policy not to allow subversive literature to be circulated within prisons. Therefore he regretted that our recommendation could not be acted upon.

My immediate reaction was that the Commissioner for Prisons had exceeded his authority. It was for the government to determine whether any publication was subversive or not. Since the newspaper in question was being openly sold throughout the colony, it could not *ipso facto* be considered subversive. The Commissioner might not like its politics but he could not unilaterally deem it subversive. Neither was he entitled to deprive any prisoner of the right to read it.

Under British law, a man did not lose all his civic rights upon conviction. Neither was he required to abandon his political preferences. If the prisoner had asked for some books on how to break out of maximum security prisons, then the Commissioner for Prisons might have some grounds for denying him the material.

I telephoned my unofficial JP colleague to enquire if he had received an identical letter from the Commissioner for Prisons. When he confirmed that he had, I asked for his reactions.

"Well," he said, "seems a bid hard. But I suppose if the Commissioner considers the newspaper subversive, then that is that."

I replied that I did not think that needed to be "that" at all. I explained my own feelings and said I intended to challenge the Commissioner because

I considered it better to make a stand now rather than wait till circumstances forced me to adopt one in public.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, we can never tell how things might develop,” I replied. “Suppose the family of the prisoner wrote to newspapers about his being denied the reading material of his choice. The issue could become public and political. We might be forced to explain why we had made our original decision as judicial officers and what we thought of being overruled by the Commissioner. So it is better to object to the Commissioner’s ruling now rather than later.”

“But won’t that upset the administration?”

“Our duty as JPs *is* to upset the administration, especially if we feel it is not following the rules or abusing them. I will naturally first attempt to sort things out informally and diplomatically, through the Secretary for Security. He has policy oversight over the prison service. No need to put anybody in a huff or make him lose face. You don’t have to go along with me, you know, if you’re comfortable with the Commissioner’s decision. I can pursue the challenge on my own.”

My statement placed my fellow JP squarely between Scylla and Charybdis, between either going back on the recommendation he had attached his name to in the prison visitor’s book or else taking on an administration which had conferred a JP-ship upon him. He was anxious to remain in the government’s good books.

After a moment’s hesitation he said: “Of course, you are perfectly right. It is wrong not to allow a fellow to read whatever he likes, unless there is a good reason to do otherwise. ‘Subversive’ is pretty vague, isn’t it? If you think you can get the ruling changed without upsetting anybody, I would certainly go along.”

“Leave it with me then. I’ll keep you posted.”

Armed with that lukewarm support, I rang my old sparring partner, the Secretary for Security. I outlined the facts of the case and said that both

my unofficial colleague and I considered the Commissioner's decision to be flawed. We did not want to put in a formal written objection if we could help it, hoping matters might be resolved more quietly. Should news of the Commissioner's decision leak, or appear in the press at the instigation of the prisoner's family, both the Commissioner and the government might have difficulty defending the decision in public.

The Commissioner was a European, with scant knowledge of Chinese. His interpretation of what was subversive might be hotly contested and the government would have to either support him or overrule him. A humiliating prospect in either case, leading perhaps even to questions before the British Parliament. In the circumstances, it might be better if the Secretary could have a word with the Commissioner, drawing his attention to the potential political ramifications of his decision.

The Secretary for Security grasped the implications very quickly. He asked me to leave the matter with him for a few days.

In due time, another letter from the Commissioner for Prisons arrived for myself and my unofficial JP partner. The Commissioner said that after further consultation with his staff, he had discovered that the fear of the newspaper's ability to subvert had been somewhat overstated. Hence he had re-considered his earlier decision and would now accept our recommendation about allowing the prisoner access to the newspapers supplied by his family.

Thus honour was preserved on all sides. A tiny victory perhaps, but I doubted if I had endeared myself to the Secretary for Security any more than on the previous occasion we had crossed swords.

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Some time in 1972, I received a letter from my father, then aged 71. He indicated an intention to visit Hong Kong "for one last time". He knew I was in an unsatisfactory marriage and that I had been living with my in-

laws. In order not to cause me inconvenience, he said, he intended to accept the hospitality offered by a long-standing university friend of his surnamed Tseng.

I replied immediately, informing him for the first time of my separation with Man-Ying and the migration of her parents to America. I was now in government quarters and it would be presentationally bad if he were to stay in Hong Kong with a friend instead of with his own son. People might think there had been some fracture in the family.

He could stay with me for as long as he wished, I said, though I was in the midst of calming agitated students and my time was not my own. The children were too young to offer him much help. All I had to keep the household ticking over was a semi-illiterate one-foot-kick providing unexciting meals. It would mean he would have to rely largely on his own devices during his stay.

The last occasion I had seen my father was in 1970, when I went to Singapore for some civil aviation negotiations. He had by then grown as lean as my grandfather had been at his age. That well-fleshed man-about-town image of his middle years had vanished; he was now as lean and spritely as my grandfather had been at that same age. His movements had slowed, however, to the leisurely tempo of one ambling through a traditional Chinese garden, complete with moon-gates and meandering paths. I doubted whether the hectic noon-day pace which had taken over in Hong Kong would suit him.

He must be feeling more lonely and out of sorts, I surmised, after the death of Anna in 1971. It came to me then that the Chinese extended family structure which had been available to him — and also to myself during my boyhood — had collapsed following the demise of my grandfather in 1961, marking a decisive end of that form of living for my family. My aunts had all gone their separate ways and so had my siblings and myself. The only unmarried one of my generation then was Tzi-Seng, still at university in England.

My understanding was that the bungalow at Berwick Drive had been sold some time after my grandfather's passing, with the proceeds divided between my father and my uncle Yan-Wing. My uncle married and eventually set up home in another part of the Serangoon Gardens Estate.

I have no clear recollection of where my father and Anna had gone after the sale of the bungalow at Berwick Drive, probably with one of their children. Losing the roof over their heads and the recurrent subsidy from my grandfather's pension would have placed them under too much financial pressure to acquire a home of their own. In addition, Anna had to pay off the considerable debts she had incurred to finance Tzi-Seng's education abroad.

Tzi-Seng had returned to Singapore and got married in 1964. When he started to work for Shell at Pulau Bukom in 1965, my father and Anna did move in with the young couple and stayed till Anna's death.

Apart from Anna's death, the misfortune of my brother, Francis, with the *Singapore Herald*, which I had detailed in Volume 2 of these memoirs, must have been a disappointment for my father too. Francis was his favourite son. A visit to Hong Kong, therefore, would be sure to lift his spirits, although many of the relatives he was most familiar with, like my Eighth Granduncle and my Ninth Grandaunt, had already passed away.

I cannot now remember exactly when he came, but it would have been when the climate was at its most pleasant, either November and early December in 1972 or March and early April in 1973. I found him little changed from our last meeting, except perhaps with a little more abstracted air than before. His six-week stay had been during the racing season, for I took him for lunch at the Owners' Box once. He was quite taken when I introduced him to other horse owners as my father and they all treated him with elaborate courtesy.

But he almost got me into serious trouble by upsetting the tenuous domestic equilibrium I had managed to establish. It happened one evening during the second week of his stay. I had gone into the kitchen to get a drink of water and found Ah Duen doing cleaning. She immediately turned and

said: “Master, you must find someone else to take my place. I do not know how to take care of *lo-yeh*. I think I have offended him.”

I was surprised because I did not think my father required much taking care of. When I asked what had happened, Ah Duen said that before she set out for the market each morning, she always asked my father what he would like to eat that day, so that she could buy the right food for him. But he always replied “*sze-tan*” which in Cantonese meant “whatever” or “as you like”.

However, at meal times, my father would sometimes leave the table without touching a single dish. Therefore she felt she must have displeased him in not preparing food to his taste, making him go hungry.

Ah Duen’s threat to leave really worried me. Although I realised there had to be some misunderstanding somewhere, I could only think of the mess I would be in without Ah Duen. I went straight to my father and confronted him with what the old servant had told me. My father readily confirmed as correct what had been reported.

I blurted out: “Father, why not help the poor woman by telling her each morning what you would like to eat that day? She is a simple country woman, not too bright. Why make life difficult for her by saying *sze-tan*?”

“I was making life easier for her,” my father replied, in the tone of one aggrieved. “When I said *sze-tan* I really meant *sze-tan*.”

“But you don’t always eat what she has made,” I said. “I know you like fish and almost every form of steamed eggs, whether cooked with minced pork or with preserved eggs and the yolks of salted eggs. Why not just tell her that?”

“Do you tell the servant every day what you would like to eat?”

“No, but I do eat whatever she produces.”

“Ah, that is where the difference in our ages comes in. You are still at an age when you eat only to fill your belly, like any other dumb creature. Have you ever considered how tedious it can be to have to specify each morning what one would like to eat for the rest of the day? I have better things to occupy my mind than food.

“Besides, I have learnt how beneficial for the human system a fast can be once in a while. If Ah Duen produces food that does not suit me, I simply fast and go without. That’s not meant as a rebuke or a show of displeasure. Neither do I want her to adjust her cooking for my sake. I wanted to see how my grandsons take to her food, whether they liked it, and how they normally ate at the table. You can always read something of a person’s breeding from the way he eats.”

I felt both chastened and humbled by my father’s remarks. I suddenly realised how seldom I ate with my sons. They had lunch by themselves each day after returning from school. I only had dinners with them when I did not have to go out. Hardly enough opportunity to instil good table manners into them, I reflected. I recalled how my grandparents used to oversee how I and my siblings ate as children. I had acted altogether too abruptly in remonstrating with my father over Ah Duen. I had failed to take his considerations into account.

His words brought back to me an episode more than two decades earlier, when both of us had been guests of my Eighth Granduncle and Aunt at No. 33 Leighton Hill Road.

We had a difference of opinion on some philosophical point. After a few inconclusive exchanges, he had cut me short by saying: “Every boy at 19 thinks his father is a bloody fool. By the time he is 29, he begins to think his father might have a valid point or two. But usually he has to be 39 before he thinks his father has been pretty smart after all. So come back to me on this point when you’re 39.”

And it had turned out very much as my father had predicted. At the age of 43, I was still learning lessons from him. Small wonder some of China’s ancient sages considered a man could not reach full maturity before the age of 40.

At the same time, I recognised afresh that after my rupture with Man-Ying I really needed a woman around the house. But what sensible woman would

want a relationship with a man saddled with three fractious sons?

So far as Ah Duen was concerned, I smoothed things over by saying that my father would be returning to Singapore soon. In the meantime, she should not ask my father for his food preferences each morning. Instead she should simply buy whatever was appropriate and ensure that each meal included either a fish or some form of steamed eggs. I also explained that when my father did not touch food, it merely meant he had decided to fast.

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The rest of my father's stay was largely uneventful. He spent most of his time in his room, engaged in the type of *zazen* meditation favoured by followers of Ch'an or Zen Buddhism. That had been slightly puzzling for me because my sister Helen had told me that when he lived with her he was quite active in a Christian church near them.

I could not help wondering if my father was trying to come to terms with his own life through meditation. It could be that he was after self-knowledge, for it was during that stay that he passed me a number of his personal seals. Perhaps he had already reached the stage when he could fully grasp the meaning of the four characters — cold, hot, self and know — that had been carved on one of the *tien wong* seals he had given me. The four words formed part of a Buddhist quotation. My grandfather, too, had turned religious late in life, after being an agnostic for most of it. I wondered whether I might go the same way in old age.

My father remained true to his old form where communications with children were concerned. During my boyhood and adolescence, he had reserved his charm and wit for grown-ups. In his scheme of things, children should be seen but not heard and should learn the lessons of life through their own observations. He thus remained distant and aloof towards my sons; they in turn held him in considerable awe.

The only one of them he made some lasting connection with during his remaining years was my second son. They had exchanged a few letters when my son was at university in North America. Before he passed away in 1994, he left my son a small collection of his Chinese poems. A relative had deposited a few of them at the University of Hong Kong archives together with those written by other members of the family.

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Meanwhile, bureaucratic life continued in an erratic course.

In spite of the heretical views I had expressed throughout the student demonstrations over Diaoyu Tai, Sir Murray MacLehose invited me several times during the first two years of his governorship to have meals at either Government House or at his box at the Jockey Club. Being at times rather simple-minded, I had taken those invitations to mean he was a big enough man to overlook my unhelpful or inconvenient opinions.

He did sound me out during those meals on subjects outside my area of responsibility. For example, he asked me how the wider public regarded corruption within the government and whether I thought corruption was as widespread as generally believed.

Those were tough questions to answer. I had insufficient direct experiences to fall back on. Certainly there had been numerous stories about ambulance crews refusing to pick up the sick unless they first received “tea money” and about firefighters called to fires declining to turn on their water hoses until they had received payments. Given the Chinese penchant for puns, the firefighters’ demands came in the form of an innocent-sounding slogan — “No water, no water.” The first “water” was the local slang for money.

The Preventive Service was supposed to guard the territory against smuggling of dutiable goods. But, if the right palms had been greased, almost anything could be smuggled in or out. The ineffectiveness of enforcing the

United Nations embargo against China during the Korean War and the continuing successes of “snakeheads” in smuggling illegal immigrants into the colony proved the point.

The police force, of course, was the most notorious for exacting squeeze and it was the target for much public ire. Payments for “protection” from gambling dens, drug dealers, establishments of ill fame and others were taken as read by everyone. Rumours circulated that some desk sergeants, controlling the rank and file at police stations, had personal fortunes running into millions.

At another level, there was also the increasing risk of intellectual corruption among top civil servants. Revealing secret government plans to outsiders could be a form of corruption. If an officer did not challenge dubious proposals for the sake of gaining promotion, that too in my book constituted a form of corruption. So was being intellectually lazy, turning into time-servers, precedent-followers and clock-watchers.

In earlier life, I myself had not been without sin. When I was a cub reporter at the *South China Morning Post*, I used to treat court clerks at the Central Magistracy to the odd cigarette or cup of coffee, in return for getting a peek at the day’s court docket. I had also accepted a free annual bus pass from the China Motor Bus Company, albeit indirectly through my City Editor. Did that compromise my integrity and objectivity as a journalist? Did it amount to accepting a bribe? Against what standards should such deeds be measured?

Fearful I might be stumbling onto treacherous terrain, I was reluctant to cast the first stone. I prevaricated. I asked the Governor which aspects of corruption he was most interested in.

“Well, you know, public officers like policemen taking squeeze or cumshaw to overlook infringements of the law,” the Governor replied.

“I am not sure I’m the right person to address your concerns, Sir,” I said. “My knowledge and experience are limited. It would be far better for you to

talk to some of the Administrative Officers in the Defence Branch or those who had previously supervised the government's uniformed forces.

“As to public sentiments, the perception is certainly that corruption is widespread. There is plenty of talk about syndicated corruption but no one knows exactly how far up the chain of command that rot has gone. That leaves plenty of scope for rumour-mongering. Systemic issues are also involved. For example, anti-corruption activities are currently being dealt with by a branch within the police. That seems to many as on a par with asking a motorist to enforce the Highway Code against himself.

“There is, at the same time, the far wider issues of fairness, equity and justice in society. If one section of the government gets significantly better treatment than another, disaffection is bound to arise. If a man in public service cannot earn enough to support his family, the temptation to make a little on the side will be hard to resist. Taking bribes may be just a symptom, not the real disease.”

I was trying gingerly to indicate to Sir Murray that the colonial system he oversaw could be at the root of many corrupt practices. I had no way of knowing whether he took my comments to heart. He said neither yea nor nay.

Not long after those conversations, however, the Godber scandal erupted and it turned into the focal point for all round condemnations and displays of public anger.

Peter Godber was a Chief Superintendent in the police. He was on the point of retirement in 1973 when it was discovered he had several millions in his bank account. Government gave him a week to explain how he could have accumulated so much on a policeman's salary. But instead of explaining, he did a quick bunk back to Britain, by apparently slipping out without going through immigration.

The public reaction to his escape was virulently negative. The government was forced to hold a public enquiry. The Governor also announced in a

speech before the Legislative Council in October of 1973 his intention to set up an independent body to tackle the problem of corruption. That gave rise to the establishment of the Independent Commission Against Corruption the following year.

The upshot of all that turmoil and anger was that Godber was arrested in Britain in 1974, extradited back to Hong Kong in 1975 and, after a six-day trial, sentenced to four years for corruption.

Godber's was by no means the only case uncovered of police misdeeds. Dozens of other policemen fled elsewhere, mostly to Taiwan, since the territory had no extradition arrangements with Britain.

The worst cases concerned four Chinese police sergeants, the most notorious of whom was named Lui Lok. He fled to Taiwan with an accumulated HK\$500 million and subsequently managed somehow to migrate to Vancouver to become a prominent businessman. He died at the age of 90, without ever being called to account.

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Over time, it slowly dawned on me that the Governor might have been inviting me for meals not because he liked the sound of my voice or the scintillating nature of my conversation. The possibility came to me that he might be making use of some of my other attributes.

I was, after all, a single man of a supposedly sober and matured age. I also had a smidgen of standing in the community. Therefore I might have appeared to him as a relatively safe choice for making up a table at Government House, should some lady without an available spouse be invited. In short, he might have considered me a kind of suitably house-broken "wog", who had mastered a few niceties of English etiquette, like the correct way of passing the port after dinner. He might have also thought me dependable enough to offer a few mildly amusing tales of Oriental obscurities to keep conversation moving.

I did not know whether such considerations had played a part in my being designated to escort Princess Alexandra when she came to Hong Kong on a Royal Visit. I was asked to take her on a walk-about through some of the more huddled side streets with market stalls.

Princess Alexandra was a tall and gracious lady. She asked a lot of pertinent questions on what she saw, such as the various types of Chinese preserved eggs and how they were made and commonly consumed. She asked a hawker woman selling eggs what her turnover was and the prices for the different kinds of eggs.



Explaining to Princess Alexandra how the Chinese preserved different kinds of eggs.

Sir Murray was among the scrum following the footsteps of Her Royal Highness like a pack of tamed poodles. Why had the Governor asked a local nobody like myself to handle such an assignment? After all, a Governor who could splash out HK\$4.7 million for a McKinsey report ought to know something about the prices of food and the various types of eggs. Or at least

one of his expatriate policy secretaries he had positioned around himself like an obedient phalanx should know.

Or had our latter-day colonial rulers followed the silly examples of their predecessors, living in a bubble and losing touch with the everyday lives of ordinary people? Decisions based on fanciful or wildly unreliable reports could hardly produce good governance.

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But I seriously let Sir Murray down on another occasion when another titled lady — a dowager of some kind — visited. He wanted to take her to the races, so I was called into service at the Governor's Box at Happy Valley.

In passing her over into my care, he told her reassuringly: "Mr. Wong here is very knowledgeable about horse racing. He owns a number of horses and is one of the 200 select Voting Members of this club. He won't let you go wrong."

The dowager was a kindly soul, made-up elegantly, though perhaps a trifle overweight and over-powdered for her twilight years. She had been provided with a Jockey Club racing programme, so I went through the races with her, marking out two or three possible selections for each race. Most of my suggestions were for safe but unexciting favourites or near favourites. I had no horse running that day.

When we came to the start of betting on one of the races — the ultimate source of the disgrace which subsequently was etched forever into my memory — the dowager got slightly excited.

"Oh, I love the name of that horse," she cried, pointing to her programme. "Vanity Fair! How marvellous a name! I'm going to put my money on its nose."

Vanity Fair was an ageing grey. Its odds on the tote were about 60 to one. For the distance of the race it had been entered for, it had chalked up a

dismal record. It had come home trailing the field over its last three outings on similar going and distance.

At that stage, I had not yet been taught my lesson by Peter Cheam. So I stuck my neck out and advised strongly against her inclination. Instead of a Jockey Club programme, I was in the habit of using a programme commercially printed by a Chinese outfit. It featured photographs of previous races run by each of the horses in the field. I showed the lady the pictures of the grey's past performances. She reluctantly accepted my advice and betted on one of the horses I had recommended.

As fate would have it, Vanity Fair came romping home to win handily, with a couple of lengths to spare. I could hardly believe my eyes.

The dowager rushed towards the Governor in a state of well-mannered excitement. "Murray!" I overheard her crying. "Vanity Fair has won at 60 to one! I wanted so much to bet on it. Such a sweet name, you know. But Mr. Wong convinced me it could never win."

It was one of those moments in life when I wished the ground I was standing on would open up and swallow me whole.

I have never discovered the kind of personal relationship which was then existing between the titled lady and the Governor. But my disastrous advice about a horse must have caused Sir Murray to be wary about my judgement on weightier matters, for I was never again invited for another meal with Sir Murray during the rest of his governorship.

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When Donald Luddington was "kicked upstairs" to become the Governor of the Solomon Islands in May of 1973, he was succeeded as Secretary for Home Affairs by another expatriate Administrative Officer, but one not half as thoughtful as he. Luddington's successor simply left my recommendation for a senior Chinese officer to be appointed to keep tabs on student and

youth groups to gather dust in some Secretariat pigeon-hole.

In October of 1973, the vacancy for the newly created post of Director for Home Affairs at the Staff Grade A level had also to be filled. A Eurasian Administrative Officer by the name of Eric Peter Ho was picked. It was his first shot at heading of a major government department. He was from a well-to-do and prodigiously large family. Its roots, like that of my own family, had been planted in Hong Kong for several generations.

Eric Ho was on that account admirably suited for tapping those sectors of public opinion the Home Affairs Department had been hitherto committed to. His partially Dutch ancestry provided him with easy access to the tightly-knitted local Eurasian community. Being locally educated as well, he could rely on the friendships, respect and contacts he had built up with former classmates during his secondary education and at the University of Hong Kong.

He was further aided in his career by being married to a talented and charming wife in the person of Grace Young, who was for many years the executive head of the Hong Kong and Yaumati Ferry Company and a long-serving Urban Councillor. During his civil service career, he had ended up occupying a far greater variety of top posts than any other Administrative Officer before him or since.

Eric was a tall man with an erect carriage and a nose a little too prominent to be taken as belonging to a pure Han Chinese. He was very popular with local Administrative Officers because of his straight-talking ways, especially when points of principle were involved. He had a very caring attitude towards subordinates. He was the only local Administrative Officer senior to myself who had made the extra effort to nurture juniors in the byways and pitfalls in the careers before them. He regularly invited them for dinners at his home in Kowloon Tong.

He was so well liked that when he decided to retire to Britain in 1991, a group of local women Administrative Officers adopted him and Grace as their godparents.

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Although I had previously worked with Eric as a fellow trade unionist in the Senior Non-Expatriate Officers Association, fighting for parity of treatment between local and expatriate officers, we had never worked together in a government department. Our career paths had gone in different directions. One of the common threads that bound us was that we had both been rejected on the first occasion we applied to become Administrative Officers. We had both been considered unsuitable material by expatriate recruitment boards.

Following Donald Luddington being “kicked upstairs” to become the Governor of the Solomon Islands, I was also “kicked upstairs” at the beginning of 1974, to work as Deputy Director to Eric.

That elevation expanded my responsibilities over the entire range of duties in the department, instead of just for the City District Offices on Hong Kong Island. It meant a temporary addition of income in the form of acting pay but that was soon overtaken by events. In April of 1974, I was promoted to Administrative Officer, Staff Grade B.



Eric Ho and myself at a Home Affairs departmental sports day.

My new post meant moving from my small and cosy office at Hysan Avenue to the department’s headquarters at International Building in Connaught Road Central. One advantage in the move was that I could walk in almost a straight line from Palm Court down to my office in the morning, without having to take a bus to get to Hysan Avenue.

In some ways, I regretted the move. During almost three years as City District Commissioner, I had developed the habit of mixing work with play with some of the staff in City District Offices.

I saw such interaction as necessary, for they were my eyes and ears in a fragmented and many-levelled Hong Kong. They belonged to certain economic, provincial, clan and family circles I was unlikely to be able to penetrate. Hence they could see or hear things I would not. Through knowing their individual characters, their strengths and weaknesses, and interacting with their families, I could weigh how much reliance I could place on their reports. Moreover, I wanted them to feel comfortable with me, more as an equal and a friend rather than as a superior. In that way I was hoping they would not hold back from telling me unpalatable truths or even vague rumours which might illuminate shifting sentiments in society.

To that end, I would gather a few of them and their families together on weekends to go on outings. Sometimes it would be a picnic or a hike. At other times, it might be a trip to Macau to sample Portuguese cuisine or else an overnight stay at a Buddhist temple in the New Territories to try out vegetarian meals. For myself, the latter might be driven by a subconscious attempt to recapture some of that vanished sense of tranquillity I had experienced when staying with my Eighth Grand aunt at The Abode of Butterflies on Tsing Yee, now mutilated and reduced to just another chunk of linked-up real estate.

For a selected two or three who had displayed skill and keenness for *mah-jong*, I brought them into my regular weekly games. The proof of the endurance of some of the relationships forged more than 40 years ago is that I still get occasional greeting cards from some of them on festive and other occasions.

After being saddled with a much broader range of responsibilities and very many more staff, I could no longer maintain that same degree of closeness and intimacy with everybody. Information had to reach me through an added layer of bureaucracy.

So far as my official relationship with Eric Ho was concerned, our interfaces remained quite limited in spite of remaining in the Home Affairs Department for another year or so. The reasons were two.



On a weekend outing with staff from the City District Offices and their families. Standing beginning from the third on the right were my three sons.

First, shortly after I had assumed the position as Deputy Director, I was asked by the Secretariat to lead a group of Administrative Officers and Senior Executive Officers on a Southeast Asia study tour. The purpose was to investigate how comparable government organisations in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore worked and to compare notes with civil servants in those places on their approaches in discharging similar duties.

Since the tour ended in Singapore, I also took some leave there to spend time with my father and my siblings.

The second reason for a limited interface was due to Eric Ho having accumulated overflowing leave entitlements from his previous post in the Commerce and Industry Department. The exigencies of international trade negotiations on which he had been engaged meant he could not take the leave he was due. Therefore he now had either to take the leave or have any excess above six months forfeited.

He chose the former; and that choice led to my acting as Director for Home Affairs for a few months. That necessitated the appointment of another Deputy Director to replace me. Thus during my final year in the department, I only had limited interaction with Eric. Nor did I work with him again thereafter, for our careers continued to take us to different parts of the bureaucracy.

After Eric and Grace retired to Britain in 1991, they set up home at Sunningdale, near Ascot. I myself had already migrated to London in 1989. It was only then that our friendship and interactions became closer and more frequent. We often met for *dim sum* lunches in London's Chinatown whenever they visited London. Or when former colleagues happened to be passing through. They regularly hosted each year a Lunar New Year meal for friends and relatives, either at their home at Sunningdale or at a Chinese restaurant in London.

* * *

In *Animal Farm*, George Orwell made an observation that all animals were equal but some were more equal than others. In my own meandering life, I had arrived at a similar kind of observation. I have concluded that all factual statements contained facts, but some facts were more factual than others.

Let me illustrate what I am driving at. If someone were to state that the velocity of light in empty space was 186,000 miles per second, that is a statement of fact, pure and simple. Anyone with the right knowledge and right equipment could test every element of that fact at any time. It would always remain true.

But if someone were to state that a certain person had been found guilty of armed robbery and had been sentenced by a court to five years in prison, that collection of facts would give rise to imputations and subjective judgements. Did the person get a fair trial? Did he have a defence counsel? Was the trial

conducted in a language he could understand? Who convicted him? A single judge or a jury? If by a jury, what was the vote? Unanimous, 11-to-one or seven-to-five? What kind of weapon had been used? A sub-machine gun or a pair of scissors? Were there eyewitnesses or was the evidence completely circumstantial? Would he have to serve the full sentence or would there be scope for remission? Had he previous convictions? Could the conviction be based on mistaken identity? And so on and so forth. Questions and doubts would swirl around that sort of factual statement.

So it turned out to be the case with not a few of the factual statements associated with the governorship of Sir Murray MacLehose. They might appear impressive when listed in biographies or history books but they seldom could stand up to close examination. Such statements are known in political jargon as “spin”.

Take the following statement often appearing in accounts about Sir Murray’s accomplishments: “Chinese was introduced as a second official language in Hong Kong in 1972, during the governorship of Sir Murray MacLehose.” The facts are, on the face of it, all perfectly correct. Being put together that way, they conveyed favourable imputations of laudable intentions. They implied that the Governor had been in some way progressive and enlightened, setting aright an unfortunate imposition of an alien language — together with its associated values and humbug — upon an occupied people for the past century and a quarter. Those imputations could be quite false. People should be assessed by their deeds and not by what their publicity machines handed out.

In terms of actual history, the most recent demands for Chinese to be made a second official language arose out of a motion moved in the Urban Council by a member named Brook Bernacchi in 1964. But the administration nonetheless tried to pooh-pooh that demand as unnecessary, as just an intellectual indulgence. To brush it off, the administration deployed the most senior Chinese member in the Administrative Service to voice dismissive

remarks. That attempt backfired more than badly.

The standard tactic by governments to delay inconvenient demands was then employed. It took the setting up of a Chinese Language Committee to study the issue. By the time the Committee reported in 1972, affirming the need for Chinese to be made a second official language, all the excuses for further delay had been exhausted.

Bearing in mind that Sir Murray only assumed the governorship of Hong Kong in November of 1971, the question that begs to be asked is: What positive contribution did Sir Murray make towards making Chinese a second official language?

If a deeper look were to be taken into the matter, a host of other questions could be asked. For instance, during Sir Murray's 11-year tenure as Governor did he attempt to make a single speech in Chinese to promote the spirit of Chinese being an official language? Did he enjoin any of his policy secretaries to attempt a single public speeches in Chinese? Did he instruct the Secretary for the Civil Service to do away with the absurdity of conducting recruitment interviews in English for posts interfacing with only a Chinese public? Did he issue instructions that henceforth all appointees to senior positions had to be competent in both official languages? And so on. Or was all the hoo-ha just empty political lip-service rather than a sincere attempt to change an unsatisfactory situation?

I have raised such questions because the Home Affairs Department had been designated as the government's Chinese Language Authority, responsible for oversight of all interpreters and translators serving in government.

During my years as a newspaper reporter, I had witnessed day after day people before magistrate courts being sent to prison who might have been set free if only they had a good lawyer or were better served by court interpretations of the charges levelled against them. On the other hand, their insouciance over going to gaol could fit well with an alarming hypothesis — that life in prison was preferable to the misery of impoverished living outside!

Their dull, indifferent eyes said it all.

So the issue of sound interpretation and translation was no minor bureaucratic slip-up. Yet there remained a breathtaking reluctance in the Secretariat to deal with the special impediments standing in the way of recruiting competent interpreters and translators. Anyone who has had any dealings with United Nations organisations could vouch for the difficulty in securing the services of competent translators or interpreters. It seemed that the already moribund hands of bureaucracy were still clutching desperately onto the breaks to progress at the tail end of the 20th century.

* * *

During my brief tenure as Director for Home Affairs, I went through two of the more trifling but nonetheless revealing experiences in my career as a bureaucrat. The first involved a “barred” file and the second a contretemps with Donald Luddington’s replacement as Secretary for Home Affairs.

A “barred” file was any file with two black diagonal lines printed across its cover. It meant that the file could not be accessed by any officer other than ones specifically authorised to see it. The file in question contained correspondence pertaining to the posting of Administrative Officers to the department and the only two persons authorised to see it were the Director and the Deputy Director for Home Affairs.

The reason for “barring” a file was fairly understandable. Administrative Officers considered themselves the cocks of the civil service roost. It would simply not do for the lower orders to gain access to what Administrative Officers thought of each other — all spelt out in imperishable black and white.

The file came to me because I had to consider a candidate for Deputy Director to fill my post during Eric Ho’s leave. That matter was easily disposed of. But my inborn curiosity always spurred me into reading any unfamiliar

file from the beginning. In the case of the “barred” file, I was astonished to discover that there had been an exchange of correspondence concerning myself some ten years earlier, between the Establishment Officer in the Colonial Secretariat and the then Deputy Secretary for Chinese Affairs. It concerned an offer by the Establishment Officer to post me to the department.

The timing of the exchange was around the middle of 1963, after I had completed two years at the Social Welfare Department. It was customary to try an officer on probation out in two jobs before confirmation. Hence the offer to post me to Chinese Affairs.

But what astonished me were the terms of the then expatriate Deputy Secretary’s reply. He rejected me, stating that he considered me “temperamentally unsuited” for work in the department.

That was surprising because at that point I had never met the said Deputy Secretary, had not spoken to him on the telephone or even exchanged any memo with anyone in the department. On what basis could he have arrived at the conclusion that I was temperamentally unsuitable? He had impugned upon my character before everyone with access to that correspondence, yet without a shred of knowledge or evidence to back up his opinion. It certainly called into question the fairness and integrity of that particular member of that so-called elite corps. I was in a way thankful for the rejection because as a consequence I got posted to the General Branch to work for Alistair Todd.

I did not meet the writer of that rejection letter till some years later. I found him to be a chubby, friendly and personable individual. I never challenged him on his assessment nor did I ask him for his reasons. I took malicious delight in thinking that, temperamentally suited or not, I was now sitting as head of that entire department and that must somehow contradict his judgement.

The contretemps with Donald Luddington's replacement occurred towards the end of 1974.

Previously, when the Secretary for Chinese Affairs operated as head of an independent secretariat charged with taking the pulse of the community, he hosted a reception for community leaders each year around the Lunar New Year, to which the Governor would lend his grace. After the reorganisation, he was effectively downgraded. He had previously been — along with the Colonial Secretary and the Financial Secretary — part of a triumvirate at the top of government. He had special responsibilities for the welfare of the Chinese population. But he had now been reduced to just another of a proliferating group of policy secretaries. All his line functions would be taken over by someone in a newly created post of Director for Home Affairs.

How the Chinese population would interpret such a disguised yet noticeable shift in the power structure was not immediately apparent. Part of the reason was because the change had been obscured by Donald Luddington continuing to discharge the line functions of the department, pending the appointment of a Director for Home Affairs. But once the appointment of Eric Ho as Director had been made, the jockeying for status and position began.

I was caught unaware and largely unprepared by virtue of becoming the Director during Eric's absence. I was asked to attend a meeting at the Secretariat with Donald Luddington's replacement. Upon arrival, I learnt that one of the topics to be discussed was the arrangement for the spring reception the following year.

The previous year, the arrangement had been settled upon before the appointment of a Director of Home Affairs. Hence the invitations went out in the name of the Secretary for Home Affairs. The line of least resistance would be to continue issuing the invitations in the name of the Secretary. But with his removal from line functions in the reorganisation and with a Director now appointed, it would not appear entirely appropriate for the

Secretary to remain as host. In any case, if the Director was to remain the main official channel of communication for 98% of the community, then the status of the Director had to be built up.

I spotted immediately a number of tricky political and presentational bear traps lying in wait. The Secretary had already been downgraded in the reorganisation. His frontline responsibilities now devolved upon the new Director. The general public should get used to the notion that the Director and his staff remained the main government sounding board for local opinion. To continue to issue invitations in the name of the Secretary would therefore be misleading and confusing.

And yet, to issue invitations in the name of the Director would make obvious too abruptly the reduced importance the government was attaching to Chinese opinion. Within the bureaucracy there was also an unspoken consideration: Eric Ho was a local and too junior to take centre stage. He was only a Staff Grade B acting in a Staff Grade A post. He might not have sufficient gravitas to play host to Executive Councillors, the kingpins of commercial hongs and banking, the captains of industry, *et al.* Hence it would be safer to have the invitations go out, as usual, under the name of the expatriate Secretary.

I could sense some such calculations floating in the air before the Secretary asked me to arrange for the invitations to be printed and issued as before. He caught me on the hop.

My personal view was that the new organisation called for the new Director to be built up as the natural person for the Chinese community to go to with their opinions and dissatisfactions. But I had little idea of what Eric's position might be since I had no opportunity to discuss the issue with him. I was only temporarily keeping his seat warm; I did not want to agree anything which would sell the toss during his absence. I wanted him to be free to make his own pitch when he returned.

So thinking, I suggested that in the light to the reorganisation and the

changed responsibilities, it might be better to issue the invitations in the joint names of both the Secretary and the Director.

“No,” the Secretary said. “Just stick to the old format and get the cards printed.” He was a man with a temperament not unlike Sir Murray’s, fond of shooting from the hip and dishing out *obiter dicta* without thinking too deeply about them.

“I’m afraid, Sir, I don’t quite agree with that,” I replied.

“Just do it.”

“Are you going to provide me with the funds, Sir?”

“Funds? You have plenty of money in your departmental budget.”

“Yes, but those funds have been voted for departmental use by the Legislative Council and I, as the current Director, am accountable to the legislature and to the public for their use. I cannot authorise an expenditure I believe to be improper and incorrect.”

The Secretary was by now not exactly frothing at the mouth but his face was growing as dark as thunder. “Just do it! That’s an order!”

“I’m sorry, Sir, but with great respect, I do not think you can order me to spend money from a vote I am personally responsible for when I do not agree with the purpose. I have a legal duty as a trustee. You can arrange for my removal as Director. But so long as I am the Director, I am obliged by law to control all expenditures. I am willing to authorise the printing of the cards if they are to be printed in the joint names of the Secretary and the Director. Forgive me, Sir, I am not trying to make trouble. But I am duty-bound to safeguard the flexibility of the substantive occupier of my office while he is away.”

There were a few moments of heavy breathing by the Secretary but he soon saw both the legal and the moral validity in my position. “All right,” he said. “Have it your way.”

Upon my return to the office, I wrote a long letter to Eric about the incident and explained I had taken the position I had because I did not know

what his own preferences were.

* * *

Morals can be drawn from such an incident. The first one is that splashing out HK\$4.7 million of taxpayer money for a consultancy report by outsiders does not assure that all loose ends and contingencies would be covered, even the most basic and obvious ones concerning legal obligations under the new hierarchical arrangements.

The second is that the most finely drawn charts illustrating chains of command and institutional structures would count for next to nothing unless the dynamics of interpersonal relationships had been factored in. And no matter how many diplomas are handed out at business schools and military academies, when the moment for a crucial decision arrives, it will be determined by the informal practices and relationships between the individuals involved. Only then would it become apparent who would be the mover and who the moved. Anyone relying solely on his position in some hierarchy diagram to get subordinates to do his bidding might find himself already a failure as a leader.

Sir John Cowperthwaite was able to set the pace and direction of much of the Hong Kong government because of the sheer power of his intellect and the understanding he possessed of how the community functioned. He was a hefty man who spoke with a very soft voice. But he got things going his way even though the Governors who sat above him and his more remote masters in Whitehall all preferred proceeding along distinctly different lines. Sir John's successes in getting his way were what I longed to emulate, though I possessed nowhere near his intelligence and his intellectual capabilities.

If anyone doubts my proposition about the importance of personality rather than rank, just think of some of the many instances in history. Say, King Henry the Second's *cri de coeur*: "Will no one rid me of this turbulent

priest!” Henry was the king yet he could not get Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, to see things his way. Legend has it that someone had to murder Becket in his cathedral to get the result the king wanted.

Or think of how much President Harry Truman had to bend and swallow his pride as Commander-in-Chief to accommodate a wayward but popular general like Douglas MacArthur.

I rest my case.

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