

CHAPTER 10

A Square Peg

WHEN ERIC HO RETURNED from long leave in 1975 to resume his appointment as Director of Home Affairs, it became time for me to move on. I had been in the department for four eventful years and, with my former slot as Deputy Director already filled by another Chinese Administrative Officer during Eric's absence, it made management sense for me to go elsewhere.

One of the grand traditions of the Administrative Service, in common with that of the ancient Chinese mandarin, was not leaving an officer in any particular area of activity for too long. Over-familiarity with a specific sector, it was felt, might breed contempt, intellectual laziness, compartmentalised thinking and even corrupt practices. Rotation was therefore deemed suitable for keeping alive the tradition for nurturing generalists with a range of skills, perspectives and experiences. Such skills, painfully accumulated, would then stimulate visions of social possibilities when eventually assigned to positions of command. When such experiences were pooled, they should provide enough creativity to tackle the most complex micro and macro social and economic problems in society.

Having such officials was an imperative frequently under-appreciated in an age of smug specialisations. The system for developing such officials naturally had drawbacks as well. For a start, garnering broad experiences over many fields might deny an officer a leadership role till it was too late in his career,

after age had turned him less dynamic and innovative or more inclined to be lulled by thoughts of retirement.

A substantive Staff Grade B Administrative Officer would in the normal scheme of things be holding a position as Deputy Director of a major government department or else one as Deputy Secretary in one of the branches in the Secretariat. If the gods were to smile on him, he might be rewarded with an acting post above his own substantive grade — and pocketing some acting pay to boot.

I myself had no expectation of good fortune for I had too often displayed insufficient sensitivity towards the feelings and proclivities of my superiors. Since the Secretariat was the home of the largest collection of senior posts, especially after the dubious expansion following the McKinsey report, it required no mathematical genius to figure the odds for being sent there.

Assigning an officer to a post had very little to do with his personal preferences. He was essentially a pawn in an unseemly game of chance played out among the top mandarins. Unforeseen events or a roll of some celestial dice often dictated where he would end up. A sudden need might arise due to a natural disaster or else the personal tragedy for an incumbent might strike. That happened to Lai Ka-Wah, a close and contemporaneous colleague, when he unexpectedly died from cirrhosis of the liver. Ordinarily, someone being promoted or going on long leave might open up an acting opportunity. In those circumstances, the hole had to be plugged even if only a square peg was to hand.

This is not to say that an individual officer would never get a post of his choice. The chances, however, must be roughly of the same order as his getting an accurate prediction of his future from a fortune stick or *chim* at the Wong Tai Sin Temple. There used to be a perverse tradition in the bureaucracy to the effect that keeping mum about one's preferences somehow increased the likelihood of getting what one desired. I imagine it might have originated from the fear of a vengeful god or a spiteful senior seeing to it that keenness

showed bad taste and hence should never be rewarded. I do not know whether that superstition has survived to our agnostic present.

The prospect of returning to the Secretariat filled me with both misgivings and anticipation. More than 11 years had passed since I first entered the Secretariat as a wide-eyed probationer. A great deal had changed. Back then, I had consorted with other fresh-faced juniors from Berkshire, Kent or elsewhere and I had been delighted with their wonderful British sense of resourcefulness, mischief and perversity.

No British colleague would mind, for example, being given a nickname like Five o'clock Bob for leaving the office on the dot. After all, the 1950s world of Suzie Wong still beckoned and had remained not fully explored. If an expatriate had reservations over his mission as a colonial servant during the death throes of empire, the requisition of a portrait of a still youthful Queen from the Government Stores for his office wall would soon stiffen his resolve to carry on regardless.

During those bygone days, juniors used to stroll into each other's offices and, over cups of tea, discuss with far greater earnestness the runs the Australians had piled up in the first innings of a Test match than with the more trifling matter of the proliferation of intercontinental ballistic missiles. They might also assess with sanguine eyes how each had bulked up "In" trays with moribund files to give the impression of being overwhelmed with work.

That had also been a time when, if a dull minute on a boring topic could not be avoided, one would liven up the piece by disinterring some dimly remembered quote from Horace or Pliny the Younger. A more harried age had since conspired with declining educational standards to bring an end to such displays of erudition. Education authorities, in fits of democratic enthusiasm, had succeeded in levelling the playing fields. Knowledge of Latin had been reduced strictly to a par with Sanskrit.

My second stint in the Secretariat a few years later had been more sobering

and humbling. Under the tutelage of Mike Clinton, with his bomb-ravaged face, and John Cowperthwaite, with his shyly hidden intellect, I had begun to realise that colonial bureaucrats with no democratic mandate to rule and yet had to make decisions impacting profoundly upon society as a whole. That placed them quite close to the old Chinese concept of an official acting like the father and mother of the people. The weight of such responsibility pressed uncomfortably upon my awareness. I feared I might not be up to discharging such a task.

After Oxford, as I moved slowly up the hierarchy, I was increasingly thrown into closer contact with expatriate power-wielders. Those experiences were not reassuring. Virtually all the top posts were still occupied by expatriates. Somehow I gained the impression that the integrity, the ethos and the *esprit de corps* in the Administrative Service, built up painfully over more than a century by a number of decent men, were slowly being dissipated by their lesser successors. The spirit of a corps was like a pool of savings. One could not draw indefinitely upon it without replenishing it from time to time. I gained the uncomfortable impression that more and more decisions were being taken off the cuff rather than through careful deliberation of the holistic whole.

Sir Murray MacLehose had arrived too late as Governor to have heeded Sir John Cowperthwaite's oft-repeated warning about the dearth of intellectual resources to proceed at faster than a certain pace. Mesmerised by the bulging public coffers Sir John had left, Sir Murray went for a populist spending spree on social services, little appreciating that it could turn into a slow poison, eating into the self-reliance of a sturdy people. Sir Murray's motives for so doing were uncertain. He might have had good intentions. His governorship was to be the last public office he would ever hold and the unkind had ascribed to him the vanity of wanting to leave to posterity a name to be reckoned with.

I supposed that becoming the absolute ruler of one of the most

commercially-savvy cities on earth could go to one's head. Given the ethos of the place, he might have calculated he could buy whatever talent he needed. If he had so calculated, then he had been mistaken.

The people available to him were confined largely to blinkered technicians, skilled in manipulating messages and numbers and putting a gloss on the workaday realities. Good governance needed people with moral and ethical commitments and philosophising capabilities towards wider visions. That type of people had to be nurtured over time, through dedicated mentoring.

What profit was there for anyone in simply boasting of an increase in the number of schools or school places if what was being taught were the wrong lessons? What was the point of brainwashing another generation with the economic shibboleth of rational free markets when they were patently rigged by big fund managers and money speculators? Or the trickle down effects of wealth when the invisible hand of corporate racketeers picked the pockets of ordinary citizens and caused wealth to flow upwards to the wealthy few instead?

The political responses and catchphrases were even worse. The lessons of the riots of the late 1960s and the student demonstrations over Diaoyu Tai in the early 1970s had not been learnt.

There appeared to be influential "China experts" in Whitehall who believed the Chinese could remain an easy touch for latter-day neo-imperialists. After all, the British had been bamboozling them into signing unequal treaties for 130 years and there was no reason why that could not continue for another 130 years. They even managed to convince a few Hong Kong moneybags of the absurd notion that China could be amenable to reviving its former tributary system. In other words, if Hong Kong could pay China a substantial annual sum, China might be amenable to letting the colony continue its wheeler-dealer ways under extended British management.

It was not very clear whether Sir Murray personally subscribed to that "expert" view. In any event, he had spent much of his career in diplomacy, a

calling where smooth-talking and perceptions mattered more than actually delivering results. That might have driven him to make a splash over expanding social services.

But to expand any activity, more skilled managers were needed. In order to get that extra talent quickly, he resorted to watering down recruitment standards. That erosion in standards gradually picked up pace and instead of a system which promoted merit it turned slowly into one which made for mediocrity. It resulted in the uncalled-for advancement of a fair number of third-raters, intellectual midgets, paper-shufflers, buck-passers, back-stabbers, time-servers, pension-calculators, opportunists and the like.

Nonetheless, in spite of that qualitative decline, the Secretariat remained the only real and tangible centre of power, the place where policies were being formulated for good or ill and where decisions, however imperfectly arrived at, had to be made. Any officer wishing to exercise the slightest influence had to find a place in that semi-ivory tower.

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There had been quite a number of Secretariat positions in which I would have loved to try my hand. The Security Branch was one of them. I wanted to learn the true extent of its knowledge about syndicated police corruption and the range of dirty deeds being committed in the name of national security. There had been rumours of the British allowing American Central Intelligence agents to interrogate illegal Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong, to identify the size and composition of People's Liberation Army units located in their home districts. It would have been illuminating to know whether there was substance to those rumours.

But the pigmentation of my skin barred me from the Security Branch. Apparently, there were too many communications marked "For British Eyes Only" and my eyes were considered not British enough.

The Secretary for Security, I supposed, had valid and adequate grounds for excluding Chinese officers like myself. After all, he had caught me red-handed violating Security Regulations, by failing to report conversations with people in left-wing organisations at a farewell dinner for the Director for Urban Services. On top of that, I had exploited my position as a Justice of the Peace to challenge the interpretation of the Commissioner for Prisons on what might be deemed subversive literature in prisons. An unflattering security profile about me no doubt already existed somewhere. Governments always preferred to be safe rather than sorry.

Having engaged the administration with very limited success in the past — when I had been an office bearer in the Senior Non-Expatriate Officers Association — I was naturally keen to enter the Civil Service Branch also to understand the full rationale for the better salary levels and perks granted to expatriate officers.

Historically, when the number of civil servants was relatively small, their management was left in the hands of an Establishment Officer. He was the custodian of a thick, red-covered tome setting out all the procedures from advertising a civil service vacancy to the proper disposal of bureaucratic zombies. Those regulations released such an air of nit-picking and ennui that the job of Establishment Officer sounded about as exciting as being a custodian of government furniture. Hence it was not a particularly sought-after post by the ambitious. Holders of that post tended to be mediocrities. On the rare occasions a top flight officer found himself in the post, he could rest assured he would not be there for long. His talents would always be more sorely needed elsewhere.

After World War II, the civil service became much more complex. At the same time it became the largest single employer in the colony. Thus the role of Establishment Officer assumed growing importance. The title was changed to Secretary for the Civil Service and it became still more powerful and sought-after. But elevating the grade of the post, however, did not necessarily mean

an improvement in the management of the civil service.

At the time I was due for re-assignment from the Home Affairs Department, the post of Secretary for the Civil Service was occupied by a highly ambitious expatriate officer who had been transferred to Hong Kong from another colony which had gained independence. Although he was only a Staff Grade B Officer like myself — and indeed he was ranked beneath me in seniority — he got the appointment on an acting basis because he was the new governor's blue-eyed boy. Since he was responsible for proposing senior postings for the decision of higher authorities, the chance of my being assigned a post in the Civil Service Branch was nil, for he would have taken my presence in the branch as a direct threat to his own position.

Naturally, beyond the common desire for career advancement, personal antipathies and philosophical differences also came into play at every level of the posting process. For example, given the way I had ruffled the feathers of the Secretary for Home Affairs when I was Director of Home Affairs, there was hardly any chance of his ever accepting me as his deputy. Because of such extraneous considerations, I could only wait to be told where my next job was going to be.

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In due time, I was informed I would be the next Deputy Secretary in the Economic Services Branch. It was a satisfactory appointment so far as I was concerned. I had served in the branch previously as Assistant Economic Secretary and was familiar with many of its responsibilities. But there was a hitch. The expatriate occupying the post at that moment was not due for leave for another four months or so, which meant I had to wait until his departure before taking up that position.

In the interim, it was decided that I should perform special duties under the Secretary for Housing. I would not be a formal member of the Housing

Branch but would work *ad personam* to the Secretary, doing whatever chores he might assign to me. My title would be an equally unspecific one — Deputy Secretary (Special Duties).

I felt slightly apprehensive over that *ad hoc* arrangement. Providing decent public housing in Hong Kong had been — and still continues to be today — a veritable Pandora's box of conflicting and tangled issues.

Affordable housing was a basic human need, similar to food and clothing. Providing it posed a serious challenge for cities everywhere because of uncontrolled and haphazard urbanisation. To my mind, it was an issue incapable of being satisfactorily tackled in isolation, without all the associated problems generated by urbanisation being taken into account, like traffic congestion, pollution, corruption, crime, fragmentation of the traditional family structure and human exploitation of various kinds. But that called for the long-term dedication of a highly skilled team embracing many disciplines and not of a single officer.

After World War II, the necessity of providing affordable housing was a matter left largely to market forces and the will of Heaven, except for some rent control legislation for pre-war buildings. That gave rise to the demand for “tea money” by those who possessed rent-controlled premises from those who wanted to live in them.

Meanwhile, as former residents who had fled to escape the Japanese occupation returned, and as refugees poured in to flee from the escalating civil conflicts in China, the housing situation became increasingly acute. Those with financial resources bought homes or paid “tea money”. Those without means fell back initially on sponging off relatives, which was what I had to do.

Those sound of limb might find work as coolies or rickshaw pullers. But they would only earn enough to pay for cubicles or bed spaces in dank and airless tenements. Those without brawn, money or relatives found shelter wherever they could. With each passing day, legions were reduced to huddling

beneath pieces of cardboard, sheets of corrugated metal or structures of salvaged plywood. Makeshift homes popped up everywhere, on hillsides and rooftops, in alleyways and every other conceivable nook of unoccupied land. Flimsy dwellings quickly turned into encampments, spreading omnifariously across the face of the colony like some unsightly and contaminating disease.

Still the government dithered. It had too many urgent problems on its hands. High among them was the anxiety over its own survival, whether it might itself be swept into oblivion by the on-rushing tides of Chinese nationalism and history. Somehow, fate turned out to be kinder than anticipated and crisis after crisis passed. That “invisible hand” of the free market somehow generated just enough wealth at the lower levels of society to justify non-intervention on providing housing.

In 1953, however, the government’s *laissez-faire* approach was challenged by a horrendous Christmas Day fire at the Shek Kip Mei. The fire raged through an entire squatter encampment, killing two squatters and rendering roughly 53,000 homeless. Those who had used their huts and hovels to engage in handicraft or other forms of making a living lost their livelihoods as well.

A veteran Administrative Officer by the name of Ronald Holmes, who had joined the service in 1938, was given the task of tackling that human disaster. Holmes, incidentally, had been a war hero. After Hong Kong fell to the Japanese, he operated in a South China army unit tasked with helping Allied prisoners of war to escape from Japanese camps. For that dangerous work he was awarded a Military Cross. He was also to receive a knighthood in 1973 for his administrative accomplishments.

Holmes and his team performed a herculean feat in rehousing all the fire victims in an estate within approximately one year. It demonstrated what dedicated civil servants could do, once there was political will and the availability of the right human and economic resources.

The accommodation provided for the displaced squatters consisted of eight six-storeyed blocks built in the shape of an H. Small box-like units lined both

sides of the long corridors to make up the two parallel lines of the H. The structures bore no resemblance to any architectural design in vogue in China during the last five thousand years. Space was allocated on the basis of 24 square feet for an adult and a fraction thereof for each child.

Another development impacted on the design of the resettlement blocks. Before the war, the building regulations required the ceiling heights in domestic dwellings to be between 16 and 18 feet. After the war, the ceiling heights were progressively reduced, so that by the mid-1950s they had dropped to a mere 10 feet.

It was nonetheless something of a marvel that 53,000 people — far more than the population of many European towns — could be fitted into just eight six-storeyed blocks. Of course, the allocation of the block and the floor where a family might go was largely a matter of chance. If a family wished to be accommodated next to another family it had developed a friendship with in the squatter encampment, that was not the sort of customer-oriented allocation any bureaucracy could cater for.

Facilities at the eight blocks were necessarily rudimentary. Only communal bathrooms and latrines were provided on each floor. They were located in that architectural hyphen linking the two arms of the H.

The need for creating a coherent community within the estate fell beneath the radar of officials tasked with setting up that first resettlement estate. Given the urgency for re-housing the fire victims, that was perhaps forgivable. Drawing an analogy from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, however, to move from a squatter area into that first estate was probably like moving from one level of purgatory to a slightly less awful level.

No sooner had Holmes completed the first phase of his mission, he was diverted to tackling exigencies in other spheres. Perhaps those who picked up the reins from him had other preoccupations; or else they had assumed the prototype Holmes had created was meant to be the one to be followed henceforth.

It was unlikely that an experienced officer like Holmes would have thought that the rules of thumb he had put in place needed no further refinements. The adoption, for example, of the 24 square feet per adult standard for allocating space simply had to be considered further.

Holmes could hardly have been ignorant of the attachments Chinese placed upon family bonds. Allocating that level of space per adult hardly provided enough room for hanging up laundry to dry, let alone for erecting an altar for ancestral tablets for prayers and offerings to ancestors. The fraction used to calculate entitlements for children also needed reconsideration. When should a child be considered an adult? At 16, 18 or what? It was not uncommon for girls to be married well before 18. Would it be fair to penalise them for housing purposes?

To complicate matters further, China did not issue birth certificates. Any child would merely be registered with the housing unit to which the family belonged. Most homeless people were immigrants from China; how could their ages be authenticated for allocating space?

Looming in the background was also the uncomfortable knowledge that contemporary British prison regulations specified that a prisoner in single confinement was entitled to a minimum of 48 square feet of space. Furthermore, one did not have to study the experiments of behavioural scientists to guess the adverse psychological effects upon small animals kept for any length of time in confined space. Similar effects on human beings could be easily imagined. So how could the 24 square feet rule be maintained, let alone publicly justified?

And what of preserving even a shadow of the Chinese concept of a multi-generational extended family? That had to go for a burton.

The provision of communal bathrooms and toilets soon gave rise to complaints of Peeping Toms and of women being sexually molested. At the same time, triad societies quickly made their presence felt. The grim and vulnerable corridors in each block were like enclosed streets.

No doubt complaints could be referred to the police. But the short-handed force, saddled with its own internal problems, could hardly be expected to patrol those forbidding corridors on a regular basis. A story of uncertain authenticity got circulated at one time, to the effect that two policemen patrolling a corridor in a housing estate in response to some alarm got waylaid by a triad gang and their service revolvers unceremoniously taken from them. Regardless of whether the story was true or not, residents drew their own conclusions. Steel gates became steadily installed outside the front doors of most resettlement units.

Today, seven of the original eight H-blocks at Shek Kip Mei have been demolished but one block has been retained. It has been made into a listed building for heritage purposes. I am not sure why. Should some structure built in Gin Lane at the time of Hogarth have been retained as a monument to the meanness of those times? I wonder.

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Following the completion of the Shek Kip Mei Estate, the logical next step appeared the construction of more estates. But it was a hopeless game of catch-up even without the other needs for job opportunities, schools, hospitals, shopping, infrastructure, entertainment, parks and so forth. And also the important missing intangibles like social cohesion, a pleasing environment and a comforting sense of peace and security.

Some of the subsequent estates which went up were in the vicinity of the old Kai Tak International Airport. After the new passenger terminal had been completed there in 1962, it quickly became apparent that space in the Arrivals Lounge was often occupied by students from nearby estates doing their homework. Although the air conditioning in the lounge must have been an attraction, their presence suggested that their homes did not provide sufficient space for them to pursue their studies in comfort.



Planes landing at Kai Tak Airport — photos courtesy of *South China Morning Post*

It also suggested a recurring failure of government to be joined-up and creative in making strategic decisions.

Kai Tak International Airport, because of its location in the midst of a heavily built-up area, had long been known in aviation circles as one of the ten most dangerous airports in the world. If my memory is correct, it had at various times been ranked at about the fifth or sixth most dangerous. For that reason international airlines took pains to use their most experienced pilots for flights into and out of the city.

Millions of passengers must have dined out on hair-raising tales of flying in or out over Kowloon City. It must often have seemed that the plane was about to pick up somebody's laundry from a rooftop — if not actually landing on top of it!

Kai Tak airport had only a single runway. The flight path for take-offs or landings had to be either over the sea or over Kowloon City. Take-offs and landings were the most dangerous parts of any air journey. For that reason, airlines always required passengers to buckle up on such occasions. Prevailing winds dictated that more in-coming and out-going flights went over Kowloon City rather than over the sea.

In 1970, when the Boeing 747 came into commercial use, the Civil Aviation Department commissioned a secret assessment by aviation experts on the likelihood of a major air disaster striking, the worst case scenario and the colony's readiness to cope. Such an assessment was duly produced based on world-wide statistics. It indicated that — on average — every major international airport suffered from at least one serious disaster once every 25 years.

Hong Kong's deadliest air accident occurred in August of 1965, when a United States Marines Lockheed Hercules plunged into the harbour shortly after take-off. A total of 59 out of the 71 marines on board were killed. Less than two years later, in June of 1967, a Thai Airways plane also crashed into the harbour, while it was trying to land during a rainstorm. Twenty-four passengers were killed.

The experts concluded that the previous mishaps had involved smaller planes. The worst scenario facing Kai Tak now would be a fully-fuelled Boeing 747 crashing into Kowloon City during take-off. Because of the population density of the area, the number of deaths and injuries would probably number around 50,000, a scale far beyond the existing capacity of the emergency services to cope.

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I had no knowledge of that alarming report till many years after the event. It came to light when a secret file crossed my desk as Secretary for Economic Services on some completely unrelated matter. Presumably, the Civil Aviation Department must have submitted the original report to the Secretariat for guidance or follow-up directions.

Upon discovering the report, I naturally read it and flipped through the file. The first thing that struck me was that I had no recollection of the crash of the Lockheed Hercules, although it had been represented as the worst air disaster in Hong Kong. As I pondered that fact, I slowly realised that I had not been in the colony when the tragedy occurred, on a cheerless European holiday with my wife, after I had completed my studies at the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague. I had also just said farewell to Sharlee. The European media did not give Hong Kong developments much attention. Therefore I was virtually unaware of what had happened. Since it had also been a tragedy with no Hong Kong victims, the subject scarcely came up in local conversation.

How easily the deaths of strangers disappeared from our collective consciousness! I suppose that is why it is easy for deaths in wars and revolutions in far-off places to be regarded as mere abstractions. Philosophers and men of letters might keep reminding us that no man was an island. But how can any sensitive soul survive in the present world of daily abominations without

going insane? Nature must have provided us with some means of shutting tragedies befalling others from our consciousness.

The Thai Airways crash had occurred while I had been engaged in manning the midnight shift at the Emergency Control Centre during the spillover into the colony of the Cultural Revolution chaos from China.

Reading through the secret file, I gained an eerie feeling the Secretariat subject officer of the time might have merely filed the report away after receipt, without analysing it for upward submission. I could find no record of any senior official having seen it or considered its implications or given instructions for dealing with its contents.

It was as if some bright young spark had noted that Kai Tak had had more than its fair share of aviation disasters in 1965 and 1967 and that, on the basis of statistical averages, a further major mishap would be unlikely for at least another 30 years. By then, it would be another millennium and, predictably and perhaps almost thankfully, it would be somebody else's palaver!

On the other hand, it could have been just one of those periodic bureaucratic cock-ups, of a subject officer about to be transferred passing over an awkward problem for his successor to pursue. And somehow, that report simply slipped between the cracks.

My inability to pin down who had done what about it, caused a flurry of questions to flit through my mind. They rose like slumbering ghosts suddenly agitated by someone disturbing their burial sites. If there was a potential for a catastrophic disaster, then all top officials, including the Governor, should have been appraised of it.

At the same time, I tried to think of reasons why the administration might wish to suppress or take no action on the report. News of a potential disaster of that magnitude could cause panic and initiate a collapse in property prices around Kowloon City. It could trigger demand for a safer and alternative airport. Yet the idea of building one at Chek Lap Kok did not gain traction till the late 1980s. Why such a delay, if the risks were already assessed in the

early 1970s? Had the risks of such a horrific disaster been taken into account before deciding to build housing estates in Kowloon City? Had a conscious decision been taken that putting the lives of so many at risk was a price worth paying in economic terms? Very awkward questions to answer.

And why had there been no public discussion about such a real and present danger? The colony had a free media. Where had their investigative reporters and commentators been over the years? Had they no nose for such a major public interest story?

After I had disposed of the separate matter requiring my attention, I asked my deputy to run down what actually happened to that report and whether its contents had been dealt with in some other file. Unfortunately, I never got answers because I was transferred to other duties before my deputy could get back to me.

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Meanwhile, tracking backwards, Sir Murray MacLehose had assumed the governorship of Hong Kong in November of 1971. The following year he announced a grandiose ten-year plan for meeting public demand for affordable housing.

It seemed to me strange that in the middle of 1975 — three years after announcing an ambitious housing programme — the Secretary for Housing should be asking for an extra pair of hands to help over housing problems. He had a branch fully staffed with Administrative Officers. If they had not been able to deal with snags which might have surfaced, how could I? That question made me worried I might be heading into a no-win assignment.

The Secretary for Housing was known to be one of the longest serving Administrative Officers, though not generally regarded as being among the brightest. He was short for a European, not even as tall as myself. He appeared affable and in rude health when I reported for duty. A vague smile

played upon his lips when he saw me. It was a disconcerting smile for it appeared mechanical, as if operated by clockwork and without roots in genuine pleasure or happiness.

I had never worked with the man before. I only knew him from two or three social encounters, plus some stories picked up from the rumour mills. He had a reputation for passing off Polonian platitudes like newly-minted profundities. Hardly an ideal type of superior to work for, I thought. But I consoled myself with the thought that my stint would be only for a very limited duration.

The Secretary began by telling me that he had arranged an office, a telephone and a stenographer for me. Those facilities, however, were to be located in a different part of the extended Secretariat building, on another floor and a considerable distance from the Housing Branch. I got the impression he was not very keen to integrate me into his team, preferring to keep me as a temporary outside helper. He accordingly did not invite me to participate in his branch meetings. I took that decision with indifference.

The Secretary told me that my job would be to make contact with major local property developers and find out how each could contribute more to meeting the colony's housing needs. I should also try to elicit from them, he said, what they thought of existing government rules and building regulations. Its systems could be adjusted if that would assist them in providing more affordable housing.

I was slightly surprised by the implications of the assignment. In the first place, the Housing Branch should have been in regular contact with local property developers all along. Secondly, such developers were primarily in the business of maximising profits and not in assisting the administration to solve problems over supplying affordable housing. Since more money could be made from commercial developments and luxury apartments, where a turn could be made in approximately four years, it was unlikely any developer would wish to divert resources into low-cost housing with its meagre margins.

In addition, should the likelihood or otherwise of developers entering this sector of the market not have been already factored into the equation before the Governor launched his ten-year programme?

Upon reflecting further, I realised that both the Secretary and his Deputy were expatriates, whereas most of the top property developers were Chinese. Many of the latter's grasp of the English language could at best be considered shaky. There could therefore have been a real communications gap between them.

So I drew up a programme for individual interviews with the chief executives of every major property corporation. Since I was acquainted with two or three of them, I got them to spread the word about my mission. After meeting each of them, I reported to the Secretary in writing. This worked out at a steady two or three reports a week. After the first few reports had been submitted, the Secretary asked me to copy my reports to the Secretary for the Environment since the developers were raising issues concerning the availability of land, whether the government intended altering the existing system of public land auctions, and so forth. So I did as I had been asked.

Generally speaking, the attitude of property developers was much as I had anticipated. They were in the business of maximising profits and it was in their interest to concentrate on what they did best. They had all acquired land banks through open land auctions. Though there had been recurrent rumours of bidding rings, nothing could be definitely proved. Since land was a finite resource and population growth an established phenomenon, land and property prices could only go up, to the benefit of developers.

Government intentions were of crucial importance to them. If they knew where the next new town or big infrastructure project was to be developed, then they could buy up parcels of agricultural land in the vicinity and simply wait for development to come their way. It required no great insight to know that if an alternative airport were to be built to replace Kai Tak, then it would have to be on Lantau Island. But where in Lantau and how would

the infrastructure connections run? To know in advance meant money in the bank.

The government itself was an accomplice in the process by rationing land. It depended on land sales or the issue of leases for a significant part of its revenue. Thus it had an interest in keeping prices buoyant. The rate of release of land was crucial, as was the method of bidding — by open tender or sealed bids. I was unable to respond to many of the queries developers had on official intentions because I was largely in the dark myself. I could only suggest a range of possibilities and promise to pass on their queries.

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During the months I was on secondment, the Secretary for Housing hardly responded to the issues posed in my reports. He rarely even telephoned me. During that entire period, he asked me to see him on no more than five or six occasions. Each time our discussion turned on some rather peripheral matter. He never once asked me to look into any particular shortcoming in the ten-year housing programme.

And I studiously avoided volunteering to do so. Since I had not been given access to Housing Branch files, I had no idea of who had contributed what to which component of the project announced by the Governor. To be critical of any part without establishing who had been the originator could be asking for trouble. It was a matter of self-preservation.

There was also a more fundamental reason for my reticence. I feared that if my criticisms hit home, the Secretary might ask for my secondment to be extended to fix whatever defect I had identified. Our personalities and our working styles did not mesh and I was keen to get back to economic matters.

Therefore I stuck to doing what I had been asked to do. The Secretary did not react to my reports on conversations with developers nor to the points

raised by them. So I occupied myself by making observations on peripheral issues.

Public housing posed real challenges, even for very advanced countries. One look at one of the “sink estates” around London or at a graffiti-splattered Parisian *banlieue* would illustrate the extent of some of the challenges. If I am not mistaken, I think one of those suburbs holds the world record for the number of motor vehicles torched on a single night of rioting. Burning cars has now somehow become a tradition for expressing dissatisfaction in the suburbs of Paris.

Public housing did not become a feature in Hong Kong till about the beginning of 1955, after the first resettlement blocks at Shek Kip Mei had been completed and occupied. So there was scope for experimentation, for learning from the experiences of others.

To that end, I suggested to the Secretary that some of the windowless end walls of resettlement blocks might be decorated with large murals for a more inhabitant-friendly environment, to soften the oppression of too much concrete. There could be murals of misty mountains or singing waterfalls, like Chinese landscapes, or of activities associated with the celebration of one of the many traditional festivals. Or even simply splashes of colours like modern art to take away some of the drabness and the resemblance of a German *stalag*.

The Secretary replied that murals cost money. I pointed out that since the end walls of some blocks faced busy roads and highways, advertising companies might be interested in such wall space for advertisements for watches, cameras, soft drinks, shampoos and other consumer products. They paid handsomely for such space on private properties and it would not be a compromise too far to allow a few advertisements if that would generate sufficient funds to pay for some cheerful murals elsewhere in an estate.

The Secretary said he would have someone look into the possibility but I heard nothing further. That suggestion could well have foundered upon the

normally sound bureaucratic doctrine of not allowing any particular source of revenue to be tied specifically to a certain type of expenditure.

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In another memo to the Secretary, I suggested initiating a resettlement housing lottery. The thinking behind it was simple. Producing subsidised housing for the masses was bound to be a long-term challenge. There were just too many squatters and others living under unsatisfactory conditions. Squatters tended to be cleared only when the land they were on was required for some public purpose. But neither they nor the government really had much inkling of when that might be. They could be waiting in their unsatisfactory shelters for years.

Meanwhile, new resettlement estates would be continually coming on stream. It would be natural for the government to first re-house those who had been on the waiting list longest or for people who had been displaced from the very site used for building the new estate. But what about setting aside a small part of every newly built estate for winners of a lottery? The people eligible to take part would be people in need of subsidised accommodation or those already in the queue.

The idea of a lottery would prey upon certain human weaknesses. The Chinese were a gambling race, believing in the element of chance or providence in life. If they bought a housing lottery ticket for a small sum, it might just give them sufficient hope of jumping the queue to keep their impatience at bay. I thought back to the days in 1947 when I had returned to Hong Kong at the age of 18, jobless and with no more than two banknotes to rub my fingers against. I had nonetheless spent some of my precious dollars on tickets for the Jockey Club sweepstakes. The possession of a ticket at least gave me the licence to dream of untold riches for a while. The inadequately housed might likewise be soothed by a dream of suddenly being allocated a home in a lottery.

There was another consideration. The Chinese are also an enterprising and practical race. Having witnessed how the Shek Kip Mei fire victims had been rehoused within roughly a year, desperate souls might collude in a bit of arson to hurry their time along. Small fires of dubious origins had indeed occurred in a couple of squatter areas. It seemed better to offer people hope rather than to drive them into despondency and desperation.

I was conscious that my proposal went against one of my own principles. I have never much liked the idea of lotteries, especially when governments resorted to them to raise public revenue, because lotteries always hit hardest those who could least afford to part with their money. Millionaires were unlikely to buy lottery tickets. Under my proposal, the prize would not actually be a monetary prize but merely an earlier award of an entitlement to subsidised housing.

In spite of its shortcomings, I forwarded my suggestion to the Secretary. It met with no response.

A few weeks later, I was surprised to read in the newspapers a speech by a Legislative Councillor named Roger Lobo in the council chamber, urging government to institute a housing lottery for long-suffering squatters and others in need of subsidised housing.

I happened to bump into Roger Lobo in the streets a couple of days later and I congratulated him on his speech. I then asked him how he came by the idea for a housing lottery. Lobo replied that the idea had been suggested to him by the Secretary for Housing. The Secretary indicated that if he would make a speech about it, the Secretary would respond by saying that the government would give every consideration to such a scheme.

"I'm glad you've pursued his idea," I said. "The Secretary is a very creative fellow."

Soon after I had completed my secondment to the Housing Branch and had been installed as the Deputy Secretary for Economic Services, I heard rumours that the Secretary for Housing had been putting it about at senior levels that my assignment to his Branch had been a failure. He was reported to have said that I had made not a single contribution towards improving or accelerating the Governor's ten-year housing plan.

What the Secretary was reported to have said was undeniably true. But somehow I had a funny feeling that in making his comments he had omitted to mention he had not asked me to examine any component in the ten-year plan. That oversight would not have been surprising to me, for he was clearly not a colleague of the same calibre as either David Baron or Donald Luddington.

I have lost count of the number of ten-year housing plans announced since Sir Murray's in 1972. Neither have I tried to follow the aspirations set out in any of them. All I know is that, four and a half decades later, many citizens of the Special Administrative Region of China are still much exercised by their inability to secure affordable housing.