

CHAPTER 17

A Summing Up

THIS THIRD VOLUME of my family memoirs covers roughly the second half of my 20 years of service as an Administrative Officer in the Hong Kong government. That period ran roughly from the autumn of 1970, when I was sent to Oxford to study the international monetary system, to the spring of 1981, when the need to meet my sons' wishes to study in North America forced me retire from public service to take on a more lucrative job in the private sector, as the managing director of an international trading company.

In writing this book, one can hardly escape the fact that much of one's time is spent in the trivia of quotidian existence. Events of real significance to one's personal or family life are few and far between. Rarer still are deeds with any social or political consequence.

Fortuitously, the period I have written about coincided with the tenure of Sir Murray MacLehose as the Governor of Hong Kong. That has enabled me to garnish my account with a few tales of a more general interest.

My relationships with Sir Murray, both working and social, had been quite limited. I was too far down the bureaucratic food chain to be much in his company. When we were in contact, however, we were seldom on the same wavelength. My views on the state of the colony and its problems were seldom on all fours with his, with the result that most of my suggestions were either ignored or rejected out of hand.

Sir Murray was the longest serving Governor in the colony's history. He held office from November of 1971 to May of 1982. His appointment had been the most unusual for over a hundred years, in that previous governors had been colonial administrators with experience either locally or elsewhere in the British empire whereas Sir Murray was parachuted in after a career in diplomacy. Presumably a person practised in those dark arts was deemed necessary during the twilight of empire. In any case, the end of the Chinese lease for the New Territories in 1997 stood like a giant "Stop" sign in the middle of the political highway.

Sir Murray was an impressive man, standing six-foot-three in his socks. He had a patrician carriage, accompanied by a softness of speech and a personal likability. He had an autocratic streak, however, which he disguised most adroitly in public. The governorship had given him a chance to leave a mark for posterity. That might have led him to become — in the words of one of my former colleagues — "fond of shooting first and asking questions afterwards".

Within the Hong Kong establishment, there had been misgivings when Sir Murray's appointment was announced. He was too much of an unknown quantity to the gin-and-tonic set. Many doubted whether he could handle a rambunctious Chinese population riddled with divided loyalties and who generally regarded Europeans as "foreign devils".

Apprehensions abounded within the local community as well. What was the temperament of this new satrap? Was he as approachable and down-to-earth as the one he was replacing — Sir David Trench — or was he a person given to imperious airs? As a representative of the British Crown, what was his mission? To prepare local opinion for some dubious Sino-British deal? But if things were ticking over nicely with the Communist authorities across the border, why appoint a diplomat?

I, too, shared some of those ambivalences. A diplomat seemed little more than a silver-tongued and better-mannered politician. Their kind had made

decisions which festered like weeping sores long after they had departed. The Balfour declaration, the Sykes-Picot carve-up, the partition of the Indian sub-continent *et al* stood as ghastly reminders.

It seemed unlikely that Hong Kong would suffer a similar fate. The local population was simply too pragmatic a bunch. But with a diplomat of unknown temperament at the helm, the future could be quite hit or miss. I told myself I had to tread carefully as a civil servant. The terrain ahead could be more unstable and treacherous than I had anticipated.

This book represents my two cents' worth on that period of Hong Kong's history with which I had some marginal involvement.

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A little background context might be useful before I attempt to sum up. Prior to Sir Murray's tenure, I had already served for more than ten years as an Administrative Officer, having signed up at the beginning of 1961. Prior to that, I had spent my first 32 years following a rootless and wandering life in a number of different callings.

Immediately after joining the civil service, I was assigned to work for David Baron, who was then the Director of Social Welfare. Baron turned out to be a very thoughtful, caring and supportive superior. He taught me how each officer could do some good even within a vast and impersonal bureaucracy. The energy and dedication he brought to his own duties and his concern for his subordinates caused me to reflect on how I, too, might make a similar contribution.

My previous interfaces with officialdom had left me with a range of negative impressions. Officiousness and heavy-handedness seemed the order of the day, mingled with ignorance, racism and bullying. It made me want to make some difference, now that I was part of the machinery.

Most people had little idea what public administration was all about,

even though they enjoyed its benefits almost every day. The complexities of modern urban life were too interconnected for many to absorb. Everything was part of a larger but hidden design, ranging from night-soil collectors to the suited mandarins dealing with other forms of unpleasantness. It was only when things went awry, when rubbish remained uncollected or when essential electricity or water supplies got disrupted, that the public would notice that what had passed for normality had broken down.

My initial years in government service were eye-opening. It was bewildering at first; but I soon appreciated the complexities and the need for patience to bring about even modest changes.

The government decided in 1965, after I had completed my probation, to send me to the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague for further studies in public administration. The students there were largely made up of civil servants from less developed countries. My conversations with them gave me fresh insights into the different sets of challenges each of them had to face.

In the poorer countries, people were more likely to be suffering from inadequate education, tribal allegiances, hierarchical rigidities, religious antagonisms, superstitions, immaturity, poor health and apathy. Their leaders might also be autocrats, dictators, oligarchs, kleptomaniacs, war criminals or mere stooges. Where elections existed, they might be rigged, manipulated, tampered with or simply bought or stolen.

The drive towards urbanisation threw up additional problems of enormous magnitudes for them, like the breakdown of the traditional rural family structures, environment degradations, the prevention of contagious diseases, isolation and alienation of the individual and the rise of a new and unfamiliar range of criminal activities.

The professional associations, trade unions, chambers of commerce, industrial bodies and voluntary non-governmental organisations which might otherwise help in the transformational process or provide meaningful checks upon misguided policies or political excesses were usually weak or non-existent.

As the months went by, I could not help commiserating with them. I was grateful that, by comparison, Hong Kong's problems were infinitely less taxing and more solvable.

Hong Kong had also been blessed immediately after the Second World War by having a large number of very able Administrative Officers on its payroll. Among them were David Trench, Ronald Holmes, David Alexander, Donald Luddington and Michael Clinton, all of whom had been actual war heroes, either highly decorated as such or mentioned in despatches. The crucible of war had somehow matured, humbled and humanised them. Having lived through quite unique and dangerous situations, they all became admirable people to work for.

In addition, Hong Kong also had the services of a few intellectually outstanding administrators, like John Cowperthwaite, Claude Burgess and Alistair Todd. Collectively, they helped shape a tradition of dedication, fair-dealing and intellectual honesty.

It has been said that all bureaucracies had to be animated from some source, taking their spirit and character from somewhere. In my view, the post-war administration had undoubtedly derived both spiritual and intellectual nourishment from the officers I have mentioned above.

It was an enormous privilege for me to have worked for most of them. They collectively restored the reputation of the administration from the scandals and corruption of the 19th century and set the stage for developing a prouder and cleaner ethos in the 20th century. The opening up of the service to Chinese officers after World War II also helped to add cultural diversity.

Cowperthwaite, in particular, did wonders economically and financially for Hong Kong when he served as Financial Secretary from 1961 to 1971. He not only had a firm grasp of economics but also more common sense and unerring local knowledge than many gave him credit for.

Just one example would be sufficient to illustrate his approach to problem-solving. Talk of having a bridge or tunnel to link Hong Kong Island to the

Kowloon peninsula had been bruited around for decades but to no avail. Economic and environmental impediments stood firmly in the way.

In the late 1960s, however, a private sector consortium put forward a proposal to finance and build a 1.16-mile tunnel under the harbour. The proposal was based on a build, operate and transfer model.

In other words, the consortium would build and operate the tunnel on a 30-year franchise, after which the ownership of the tunnel would be transferred to the government. The proposal envisaged two lanes of motor traffic in the tunnel, one in each direction. The calculations of the consortium had no doubt been based on a minimum of capital outlay and a maximisation of returns.

But Cowperthwaite, as Financial Secretary, would have none of it. He told the consortium he would not consider a franchise unless the consortium doubled the capacity of the tunnel to two lanes each way. The consortium went away to mull its figures. It continued to lobby for its original plan. In the end, however, it agreed to what had been asked.

A Cross Harbour Tunnel Ordinance was therefore passed by the Legislative Council in 1969 and the project went ahead, with the public purse providing only the access roads. The tunnel opened in 1972 and it soon became one of the colony's most heavily used thoroughfares. The consortium earned vast profits, notwithstanding being forced to increase capital commitments well beyond its original projections. The tunnel was transferred to public ownership in 1999.

That episode undermined the myth that the private sector always knew better than civil servants when it came to making business decisions. I had no knowledge of what Cowperthwaite had taken into account when he made his *démarche* for the tunnel's capacity to be doubled. No doubt he must have studied the growth of vehicular traffic on the cross-harbour ferries operated by the Hong Kong and Yaumati Ferry Company. But he must also have factored in various intangibles, like the middle-class's obsession with private

car ownership, the growth in the wealth of the community and the likely conservative projections supplied by the consortium. In whatever way he arrived at his decision, he had enough courage of his own conviction to call the consortium's bluff.

The way that Cowperthwaite and his contemporaries handled various issues reminded me of a passage from Herman Finer, a British political scientist. Finer once asserted: "If men and women are competent enough, they can give life even to inexact, confused, and rough-hewn demarcations. Personnel is the sovereign factor in public administration. Will and mind are first; they engender policy, and mechanism is subsidiary to function." How true!

If further evidence were needed to demonstrate the managerial capabilities of many Hong Kong civil servants, subsequent years showed that the Mass Transit system, the Hong Kong section of the Kowloon and Canton Railway and the two main bus companies in the colony had all been successfully run by ex-Administrative Officers. So also the management of the Daya Bay nuclear power station in Kwangtung Province, which continues to this day to supply a significant amount of electricity for Hong Kong.

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One of the things that struck me while studying at The Hague was that hardly any of the Western literature on public administration ever made reference to China's long experience with running a vast territory. For example, the Chinese had long held the notion that public officials were there primarily to serve the people. Thousands of years before opinion polls became fashionable, wise Chinese kings and emperors had sent officials out to collect the folk songs sung by the common people, so that they could be acquainted with the joys and sorrows being expressed by their subjects through song.

They also had the foresight to set up an Imperial Censorate, whose members had the duty to criticise the policies and conduct of the government. Imperial

Censors were expected to function in much the same way as the modern independent media used to, before turning themselves into self-serving oligopolies controlled by the few. They used to criticise without fear or favour, beholden to no one. If their comments were cogent enough, they could bring down governments.

But Chinese Imperial Censors had no legal or constitutional protection. Their activities could only count on the moral support of tradition. It would be up to the emperor to listen to them and to take action, even if powerful personages or court favourites came under attack. Censors knew they could risk their jobs or their lives by expressing inconvenient opinions.

Most celebrated of all was China's imperial examinations system, which for over 2,000 years had been aimed at selecting the most meritorious candidates for public offices. Furthermore, to guard against favouritism, such officials would never be allowed to serve in their native districts. They would normally be rotated every three years to prevent them getting too cosy with local vested interests.

Since Hong Kong was a Chinese city, it was puzzling why the British had not taken greater account of China's experiences in organising its colonial bureaucracy. I therefore decided, after my return from The Hague, to see what I could discover by studying at greater length the history of the Chinese and Western systems of appointing public officials.

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In the West, Alexander the Great was probably the first ruler to demonstrate the economic and political gains to be had from good organisation. But on the whole, Western writers from Xenophon to Machiavelli tended to concentrate on how a ruler could best retain his power. This was understandable because Europe was for many centuries made up of only principalities and city states, often at war with one another. Few had to deal

with ruling any territory as extensive as China's.

In the 12th century, Frederick II made a number of promulgations on the subject and some writers later claimed he had issued "the birth certificate of modern bureaucracy". But actually a spoils system, based on nepotism, patronage and shifting alliances, prevailed long afterwards. Those with power basically issued licences to friends and supporters to make money, either in the form of a letter of marque to attack foreign shipping for plunder and spoils or through awarding an "office of profit under the Crown".

No one seemed particularly alarmed by such unseemly developments until around the middle of the 19th century. Then a German professor by the name of Lorenz von Stein raised the issue. He pointed out that public administration had to take into account other disciplines, like sociology, political science, administrative law and public finance. He was duly dubbed "the father of the science of public administration".

Around that time, Bismarck was considering the amalgamation of some of the Germanic states and Britain was starting to move towards some form of merit-based civil service. Thereafter, British appointments both domestically and throughout the empire went through a selection process.

Not to be outdone by Europeans, Woodrow Wilson, the future American President, penned an essay titled *The Study of Administration* in 1887 and brought the subject to greater academic attention. His supporters claimed he was "the father of public administration".

At the beginning of the 20th century, Brooks Adams, an American historian, held that a rapidly changing world environment was creating an unprecedented need for the administrative or generalising mind and that any failure to meet that need could lead to revolutions and even to the eventual dissolution of civilisation itself.

A whole range of other scholars soon echoed a similar view. For example, Charles A. Beard stated that: "There is no subject more important . . . than this subject of administration. The future of civilised government, and even,

I think, of civilisation itself rests upon our ability to develop a science and philosophy and a practice of administration competent to discharge the public functions of civilised society.” Dwight Waldo, another writer, added in his book *The Study of Public Administration* that: “Administration is at the centre of our civilisation, and it is the big questions that civilisation is about, one way or another.”

Thus the importance of public administration gradually became recognised in the West. But certain important administrative processes still remained either ignored or not fully analysed.

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On the other hand, the massive Chinese literature reaching back for well over 2,000 years gave early recognition to its importance. The whole issue came to the fore soon after the first Emperor of Ch'in unified the country by defeating the rest of the feudal kingdoms in 221 BC. Conquering a vast land mass was the relatively easy part of his enterprise; administering it was much harder. The Ch'in Dynasty faltered in its attempts to do so and, coupled with its own cruel misrule, the dynasty collapsed after only about 15 years.

The Han Dynasty came into being as a result. The same problem had to be faced. It was a thinker by the name of Tung Chung-Shu who offered a solution based on Confucian teachings and their moral imperatives.

Tung lived approximately between 179 and 104 BC. He had some unfounded notions about Confucius being sent by Heaven to start a new dynasty but apart from that, he was largely responsible for installing a management system for the new empire.

He did this by writing a memorial to the Han Emperor Wu around 136 BC, suggesting that territorial unification was not enough. A unification of thought was needed as well, he argued, before recommending that: “All not within the field of the Liu Yi (Six Classics) should be cut short and not

allowed to progress further.”

Some might interpret Tung’s words as a return to the failed authoritarian state doctrine already attempted by the First Emperor of Ch’in. But that was not the case. Confucian thinking had made progress after unification and had become more eclectic by amalgamating some ideas from other schools of thought. What Tung was trying to do was to gain pre-eminence for Confucian precepts, by making knowledge of them a prerequisite for those seeking official positions. He viewed governance as a moral undertaking.

Emperor Wu accepted Tung’s recommendation and formally announced that Confucianism would be regarded as the official state teaching. The Emperor also decreed that those who were experts in other schools of philosophy should be ejected from government posts. But he did not specify any punishment for the teaching non-Confucian ideas on a private basis.

The moves initiated by Tung had far-reaching effects. They imposed not only an implied duty upon those carrying out official duties to take account of the Confucian virtues of human-heartedness and righteousness but also reinforced certain popular habits and values which have persisted in Chinese society till the present day. Examples would be the general cohesiveness of the family structure among large segments of the population and the keenness of parents to get their children educated.

Tung believed that man — contrary to the Christian belief that man was born in sin and needed to be redeemed by Christ — was born inherently good. But his natural goodness had to be developed through education, until it reached its full potential. Otherwise that inherent goodness would be wasted, like the proverbial seeds being cast upon stony ground. Government officials, Tung felt, should be teachers to cultivate the goodness in people.

Under his system, the selection of officials was no longer dependent upon wealth or noble birth or being well-connected but on merit. That merit would be determined through periodic public examinations, open to all, but centred upon mastery of the Confucian classics. That system made for more social

mobility and the development of a new aristocracy schooled in a humane philosophy. Its members could thus be trusted with the affairs of state and with promoting the public good.

The examinations were conducted at four levels. The lowest was at the county level and then the district level. Those who passed those levels but failed to move beyond them might still gain some minor position as a clerk or village headman. Otherwise, they might become teachers. The provincial level was next and those who passed them often secured positions of considerable influence and power.

But the plum positions were reserved for those who could pass the examinations in the capital, held at the imperial palace where the emperor himself was theoretically the Examiner-in-Chief. Most emperors, however, delegated that duty to someone else. Those who passed at that level secured high positions and became important members of the bureaucracy.

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The Han Dynasty came to an end in 220. What followed was another 400 years of armed conflicts, confusion and disunity. A series of different dynasties once again ruled over different parts of the country. Alien races who had penetrated the Great Wall reigned in the north. During that period of social instability and political uncertainty, Taoism revived. Buddhism also made great inroads after its arrival from India. It was not till 590 that the Sui Dynasty managed to reunify the country again.

But the Sui Dynasty began encountering the same problems of administrating so vast a territory. It updated some aspects of the imperial examinations system but its rule did not last long. It was replaced by the powerful and highly centralised Tang Dynasty. That marked the start of another golden age in Chinese cultural development.

The imperial examination system again became reformed and re-established

in 622. A few years later the Emperor Tai Tsung ordered that a Confucian temple be established in the Imperial University and that an official edition of the Confucian Classics be prepared, together with the commentaries made upon them. The emperor then reaffirmed Confucianism as the official teaching of the state by commanding that its classics and commentaries be taught at the Imperial University.

The examinations at the capital were always gruelling affairs. The candidates had to turn up at dawn with their cold meals because they would not be allowed to leave until the examinations were over. Such examinations lasted for several days, with candidates isolated in cubicles.

The Confucian classics might be filled with moral exhortations, but that did not prevent some candidates from trying to cheat. As a precaution against favouritism, all essays written by candidates had to be copied by clerks before the copies were submitted to the examiners, lest the calligraphy of some candidates might be recognised. Subjects for essays were set, sometimes by the Emperor as the Examiner-in-Chief, and sometimes by the Prime Minister. Candidates had to expound on the subjects specified, with references to the classics and the literary allusions contained therein. It was rare for anyone to be sufficiently prepared for success at the national examinations much before the age of 30.

In addition, the passing rate was quite low. For example, it was recorded that in the 1889 examinations over 14,000 sat but only about 300 passed. Even that low pass rate could sometimes lead to problems in that the creation of civil service posts was slower than the number passing the examinations!

On the other hand, there was no bar whatsoever to any failed candidate presenting himself again at the next round. Hung Hsiu-Chuan, the leader of the Taiping Rebellion, had presented himself for the examinations four times and had failed each time. Had he been successful, the rebellion in 1850 which cost between 20 and 25 million lives, might conceivably have been averted.

There was another celebrated case of perseverance by a man named

Liang Hao who had lived during the Sung Dynasty. He kept turning up for examinations until he finally passed one at the age of 84.

It had also been recorded that in 1889, in Anhui Province, 18 of the candidates at the provincial examinations had been over the age of 90! It was therefore not uncommon for a grandfather, a father and a son to be all sitting for the same set of examinations at the same time. A sterling illustration of the practice encouraged in the old British maxim of “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

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For a person to be acquainted with the nature of virtue was one thing; for him to live a life that was virtuous was quite another. Although all officials appointed through imperial examinations had, *prima facie*, to be steeped in Confucian ethics, quite a number of venal and self-serving ones held public offices. The sad truth was — and remains — that any combination of greed, arrogance, opportunity and force of circumstances could render human beings susceptible to corruption.

It ought not to be overlooked, however, that there had also been no shortage of officials living up to Confucian ideals. The stories of those righteous officials were the ones that the common people — generally referred to as the “old hundred surnames” — took to their hearts.

One of the earliest officials celebrated by them was Wat Yuen, who served in the kingdom of Chu during the period of the Warring States. Wat Yuen took office before the imperial system had even been instituted. When he realised his own inability to dissuade his sovereign from acting in a way harmful to his kingdom, he committed suicide by jumping into the Milo River clasping a large rock.

Wat Yuen also happened to be an exceptional poet and his long poem, “Encountering Sorrow”, is still beloved by many today. The Dragon Boat

Festival, held each year on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, continues to be celebrated by Chinese people everywhere, to honour his memory.

There had been many other principled officials throughout the ages. I have already made references to Chancellor Fan Chung-Yen of the Sung Dynasty and Chang Chu-Tseng of the Ming Dynasty in Chapter 6 of this memoir.

Fan wrote four essays against the decadent ways of his time and later submitted a ten-point petition to the throne suggesting, *inter alia*, the establishment of schools to train practical men for public service. He was much before his time. Chang, who held power for 14 years, instilled discipline into officialdom by insisting that each official should fulfil his duties according to his station in life.

Anyone with a reasonable knowledge of Chinese history can easily draw up his own list of admirable officials. There are many to choose from. My list would certainly include the Sung Dynasty official Su Tung-Po — a celebrated poet, prose master, calligrapher, painter, administrator, engineer, magistrate, Confucian statesman, Buddhist metaphysician and champion of the poor.

This is not the place to detail the many facets of Su's life or to trace the ups and downs in his tumultuous career. His public achievements ranged from the establishment of irrigation and sanitation systems in Hangchow and Canton to orphanages and hospitals wherever he found the need for them. His famine relief efforts and attempts to gain tax forgiveness for the poor were also exemplary.

His fall from imperial grace was just as spectacular, leading to his demotion, arrest, exile and being pilloried as the top name in the infamous Yuan Yu Partisans' Tablet. All the 309 people thus named and their children were forbidden by imperial decree from ever holding government office. It so happened that shortly after Su's death a thunderbolt struck the stone tablet erected at the palace and split it in two. But that is a story better told elsewhere. Suffice it to say that through good times and bad, Su never compromised his integrity or his principles.

It is not unreasonable that the standards set by people like Su should be the ones used nowadays to measure the performance of public officials. Whether today's younger generations know enough about such larger-than-life characters depends on their education. If Su's actions were brought to the attention of the young, I have little doubt he would attract many modern admirers, both for his courage and integrity as well as for his poetic and other talents.

Contemporaneous with Su was the great Sung Dynasty Prime Minister and historian Szema Kuang, who towered intellectually and morally above his generation. He was more interested in carrying out his duties than in personal power. He was also the author of the monumental *Mirror of History*, which recorded the history of China up till the Sung Dynasty. The work comprised 294 volumes plus 30 volumes of appendices and set the standard by which subsequent histories of China were judged.

Given China's long history, the odds must be that there had been many other honest and upright officials who went their way unsung and unremembered. The number might be far more than commonly imagined. Take for example some of the Imperial Censors who worked during parts of the Eastern Han Dynasty and the Ming Dynasty. They did their duty by holding truth to power and paid for their honest opinions with their lives. A number of them wrote their reports against official misdeeds without mincing words and then committed suicide because they knew that fate awaited them for daring to criticise powerful officials for corruption or for implementing misguided policies.

Apart from the Imperial Censors, other upright officials also often levelled sharp criticisms of government policies at a risk to their own careers. A flavour of such criticisms can be gleaned by quoting an extract from a letter Su Tung-Po wrote to the Emperor Shen Tsung.

Su was at the time only 32 and occupying a strictly literary post in the Department of History. He was against a scheme for forcing high-interest

loans on peasants and he wrote: "In all things, great and small, one should not depend on force, but must observe reason and the nature of things. For in all things done according to reason one is bound to succeed, and in all undertaking against reason one is doomed to fail. Now your majesty has compelled the farmers to pay you high interest, and you have entered into competition with businessmen for profits. Is this in accordance with nature, and do you wonder that it has failed? . . . If your majesty has the welfare of the people truly at heart, the people would show confidence in you despite all rumours; but if you are going only after revenue, the people can hardly be convinced by words. If a judge receives presents from a defendant and lets himself be influenced in his decision, people will only say he has been bribed; and if a man takes what does not belong to him people will call him a thief. That would only be calling a thing by its right name. Now, you are receiving 20 per cent interest from the farmers' loans, yet you are insisting that you are not making these loans for interest. How are people to believe you? A man is condemned by his acts and not by what he professes to do. . . . All this commotion is because the whole country is coming to believe that your majesty is looking for the revenue, while you maintain that you are only working for their good. While you insist that you are totally disinterested, the whole world thinks that you are avaricious."

Of course other officials might not have been as forthright as Su. When some found their work grating upon their consciences, they would simply use the time-honoured grounds of returning home to look after aged parents to seek the emperor's permission to leave. Such pleas, rooted firmly in the tradition of filial piety, were not ones that even bad emperors would dare to reject or refuse.

Such departing officials often left no historical mark, unless they also happened to excel in some other sphere of human activity. One such official was the Six Dynasties official Tao Yuan-Ming. He had served for ten years before becoming so disgusted by the in-fighting and corruption in the court

that he decided to quit. Upon leaving, he coined a phrase which subsequently passed into common usage, indicating he was not prepared to “bow like a servant for five bushels of grain”. He became a recluse after retirement and concentrated on writing poetry.

His poems did not make much of a splash during his lifetime. But when the most famous Tang poets, Li Po and Tu Fu, came along two-and-a-half centuries later and praised them, their praise elevated Tao to poetic greatness. Tu Fu, of course, was himself also a public official of great courage and character.

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The Confucian principles instilled into Chinese civil servants did not end with the Revolution of 1911. When a republican constitution was being drafted, robust discussions on the role of Confucian teachings in the new republic took place. Eventually, it was decided that Confucianism should be adopted as a fundamental principle for ethical discipline in government. That new constitution, however, was never put into practice because the country soon descended into internecine war and factionalism again.

Nonetheless, Sun Yat-Sen continued to advocate his “Three Principles of the People” which relied heavily on Confucian ideals. Furthermore, when his disciple, Chiang Kai-Shek, ruled the country, he set out in his book *China's Destiny* in 1943 a programme for reforms which also laid heavy stress on Confucian principles.

Given the shallowness and muddled thinking about national education in contemporary Hong Kong, it might be worth quoting a passage from Chiang's book to provoke reflection.

The man who had spent much of his life fighting Communists said: “To cultivate the qualities essential to China's salvation means we must revive and extend the traditional ethical principles of our nation. The most important

task is to develop our people's sense of propriety, righteousness, integrity and honour. . . . In China, loyalty in its highest sense is loyalty to the state; filial devotion in its highest sense is devotion to the nation. In both cases, one must be mindful of private and family interests in serving the public and the state. Obviously the existence of the state and nation is a prerequisite to individual existence. It follows that we should regard obedience to the orders of the government as something given of our own free will, and the service demanded of us by the state and nation as service rendered of our own free choice. Evasion or manipulation of the laws is not allowed by the government; the choice of easy duties in preference to what is difficult should not be approved by the people."

The Communists, meanwhile, were also giving thought on how to legitimise their rule. They took inspiration from a two-page essay written by Mao Tse-Tung in 1944 titled "Serve the People". The doctrine Mao expounded was that the Communist leadership should always be subordinated to and in sympathy with the masses of the people.

Since administrators and technologists were needed to modernise the country, the Communists decided that such officials should accept service to the public as the sole source of their authority and legitimacy. That implied that each one had to bear personal responsibility for his decisions. Mere efficiency in outcome was not enough; decisions had to pass the moral test of whether they served the people. After attaining power in 1949, the new government began putting that theory into practice.

The education system was re-organised to emphasise the need to serve the people and all secondary school students had to spend one month out of the school year to work on farms or in factories to guard against producing "educated snobs" seeking personal rewards or advancement like under Western managerial capitalism. Entry into university was also no longer a personal or family decision. A person wishing to proceed to university had first to secure nomination by his or her work unit, whereupon the candidate would then be

vetted against other nominations from other work units.

The approach of trying to instil a sense of achievement through nation-building worked reasonably well for a couple of decades. Average productivity increased by nearly four per cent each year while wages and food prices remained relatively stable. Indeed, salaries at the upper levels were actually reduced in 1966. But contradictions began building up within the system and that set the stage for the Cultural Revolution.

The Communist emphasis on self-sacrifice and serving the people harked back in some ways to Confucian ideals, although certain other Confucian ideas came under attack for being feudalistic and impediments to socialist goals.

There was very early recognition by the Communists of the vital importance of trained personnel. Once they had attained power, they recognised that the country was vast and there was a lack of qualified people to do most of the work that had to be done. In order to jumpstart development, they set up an elaborate recruiting programme for trained overseas Chinese scattered around the world. They appealed to their patriotism, urging scientists, engineers, doctors, teachers and others to return to engage in the monumental task of reconstructing and modernising the Motherland. Apart from appealing to national pride, they offered generous employment terms, according to their qualifications and experience.

Many overseas Chinese responded during the 1950s — particularly those chaffing under colonial regimes — and China was thus able to make up to some extent the severe skill shortages in many spheres of national endeavour. Of course, quite a number who returned could not adjust to the austere lifestyle demanded of them and soon became disillusioned. But a great number stayed and made their contribution to China's modernisation.

Today, there appears to have been some overt promotion of Confucian values by the Chinese government. It is busy setting up Confucius Institutes in various countries across the globe to spread the teachings of the sage.

This brief and quite inadequate outline illustrates the fact that China, in spite of going off-track from time to time, had followed with consistency a philosophy of governance based on moral principles, with officials serving — in theory at least — as the father and mother of the people. How well those principles had been carried out over the centuries depended on the calibre and the dedication of the individuals holding office.

It seems strange that so many other civilisations should have failed to examine some of the Chinese historical practices and moral imperatives and, where appropriate, incorporate some of their positive features into their own public service systems.

Quite recently there has been talk in Hong Kong of starting a staff college to train senior civil servants. Such a project should have been started decades ago. Still, better late than never.

However, before anyone gets carried away, I would caution against following any model that currently exists elsewhere. It would be best if the staff college could begin with what ancient Confucian scholars called a rectification of names, that is, of using words with their actual meanings rather than employing a lot of flaky management-speak.

A Hong Kong college must also be rooted in local realities which the city's past educational system had, either by design or default, failed to impart to students. The college must first make up for that defect by bringing students a deeper awareness of China's cultural past, so that they can derive inspiration therefrom. A large dose of ethics and the histories of native Chinese philosophies would not go amiss, given the vital need for delivering both a caring and a corruption-free government. When all that has been absorbed, then there would be scope for comparisons with alien philosophies and other systems of governance and to select from them elements which might be worthy of emulating.

It might also be worthwhile for any local staff college to consider the range of different courses it might offer. For example, the successful completion of a

basic course might be made a prerequisite before an officer could be confirmed to the permanent establishment. Likewise, the successful completion of a more advanced leadership course might be required for anyone seeking promotion to the directorate level. A reappraisal of the wisdom or otherwise of appointing officials on contract rather than on pensionable status should be carried out.

Lecturers at such a college should not be made up of pure academics but should also include retired top civil servants who have had long practical experience in navigating the slippery ins and outs of governance and had to decide not only between the good and the bad but also from a range of competing evils.

* * *

The British moves in the middle of the 19th century towards a merit-based system for selecting public officials naturally had an impact on Hong Kong. They resulted eventually in three Cambridge graduates being sent to the colony to serve as the first “cadets” in 1862.

It is important to point out that the British merit-based system was significantly different from the established Chinese one. First of all, the Chinese system was based on mastery of a particular philosophy, with all its attendant values and relationships within an established society. A successful candidate would be expected to conduct himself in accordance with the rules set by that philosophy.

The British system was not based on any political or religious creed but only on a candidate having acquired a decent university degree in a subject of his own choice. He would then be interviewed in the august chambers of the Foreign Office by a couple of eccentric old Etonians in pinstripes, who would probably ask him a few fay and esoteric questions on subjects of no great consequence.

Vacancies in Hong Kong had been quite limited for much of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, due to financial constraints. The odds on being selected, however, were still much better than those sitting through the rigours of an Imperial Examination in China.

After being appointed, a cadet did not have to follow any specific philosophical or religious orientation except to serve king and country. His decisions in whichever colony he might be sent could be made in accordance with his own disposition, save that he had to keep an eye out for any precedent which might have been established by predecessors before him. After World War II the cadets became known as Administrative Officers.

The second important difference between the two systems was that the British one was more firmly based on race than on merit. Although the Hong Kong administration had announced a policy of localisation in 1936, its implementation had been less than half-hearted. No Chinese was admitted into the Administrative Service till 1946, regardless of how many qualified or intellectually gifted Chinese candidates there might have been.

Even after that belated implementation of the localisation policy, the number of Chinese was still limited to one per annum. The ratio of roughly one Chinese to three expatriates prevailed till the early 1960s. That statistic hid a further disadvantage for locals because the whole selection process was conducted in the English language, which was not the natural language of local candidates.

For a long time, the official alibi for the low Chinese intake was that the local universities produced only a limited number of graduates and many of them had prepared themselves for other professions. That neatly sidestepped the fact that many Hong Kong students had gone abroad for studies as well and had returned looking for suitable employment. The more plausible reason for the low intake was because the British had reservations over the loyalty of locals in the face of rising irredentist sentiments in the 1960s. It was not until after the Sino-British Joint Declaration had been signed in 1984 that

the recruitment of expatriate officers came to an end.

To be fair to the British, that precaution of keeping a conquered people in check was not unique among Western powers. When the Manchus conquered China in 1644, for example, they also insisted that every senior post occupied by a Chinese had to have a duplicate filled by a Manchu. Naturally, the Manchu counterparts, being political appointees, did not have to pass any competitive examination. The traditional Chinese system therefore became more corrupt towards the end of the Ching Dynasty. Some public offices were simply sold for cold hard cash.

The third difference was that the British system had no provision for demotions or other specified forms of punishments for inefficiencies or failures to function effectively. Indeed, since each officer had a personal grade, he would suffer no reduction in salary should he be assigned to a less important post. Unless he committed a misdeed serious enough to warrant criminal prosecution or action under Colonial Regulation 55, his pay and his iron rice bowl were secure. The worst that might be expected would be to be sidelined in some backwater.

The Chinese system was different. If an official performed unsatisfactorily, he could be easily demoted, fined, given a reduced salary, exiled or dismissed. If he fell out of favour with a foolish Emperor, he might suffer an infinitely worse fate.

* * *

After I had joined the administration, I was asked on three occasions during the 1960s to sit on recruitment boards for selecting local Administrative Officers. Those were interesting experiences which I had detailed in Chapter 6.

Much as I would have liked to see more Chinese at the apex of government service, I saw no merit in simply having more yellow faces for the sake of more yellow faces. Quality mattered. In my view, a local candidate had to

be better than the average run of expatriate recruits because the colonial dice were already loaded against him. His performance would be placed under a microscope. If he performed well, that would be taken as a matter of course. After all, he had been selected by a panel composed mainly of senior expatriate officers. If he did poorly, knowing smirks would be exchanged to confirm the die-hard myth that local people were simply not up to governing themselves.

Very able local officers, like Eric Ho and Lai Ka-Wah, had failed in their initial attempts to join. Candidates sitting for the Chinese Imperial Examinations over the centuries had also regularly failed. So it was no shame not to make the grade on the first try. But it was important that those selected should be made of superior stuff.

The problem of governance was not just a matter of officers of one race *vis-à-vis* those of another. Good governance required a combination of brainpower, a questioning attitude and a sense of moral purpose. Hong Kong was a very competitive city; fortunes in other callings beckoned relentlessly. A candidate who had been turned down might head elsewhere and be lost to the public service forever. After all, civil service pay promised only hard graft and plain living. That was why I considered the ethical predispositions and the willingness of candidates to dedicate themselves to public service were much more important than their intelligence.

My approach, however, did not find favour after Sir Murray came on the scene. He wanted admission standards to be lowered, on the grounds that every candidate had to serve a three-year probation and anyone found inadequate could be tossed out before confirmation. I had grave reservations over his approach and made my reservations known. As a result, I was never again asked to serve on a recruitment board.

The repercussions of laxer recruitment requirements did not become obvious to Sir Murray till the end of his tenure, when he had to seek outsiders to fill key posts. In subsequent years, long after I had left the service, I derived

a certain amount of satisfaction from noting that many of those chosen by the boards I had been on had reached the highest ranks in the government.

* * *

As I climbed the bureaucratic ladder, it became apparent that — contrary to public perceptions — administrators in key positions had some scope for creative changes within the civil service, if they were so inclined. Even minor tweaks to existing procedures could bring more convenience and benefits to the general public.

But there existed some issues which could only be tackled if entrenched orthodoxies were challenged. The inequality in treatment between local and expatriate officers was glaring, for instance. For a Chinese officer in a British bureaucracy to raise such an issue — unless done as a trade union representative — entailed risks of being labelled as a person with a racial chip on his shoulder. Likewise the heavy Eurocentric content in the educational system had the effect of de-culturalising and destabilising Chinese children.

And yet, curiously, there appeared to be many human traits common in the make-up of the ordinary Chinese and British peoples. For instance, both possessed a strong sense of fair play and were given to a range of eccentricities. Moreover, many maxims hallowed in both cultures were almost identical in meaning, as in “My word is my bond” or “Death before dishonour.”

Notwithstanding such similarities, the lack of awareness by the young of their own culture and past hampered them in divining a meaningful future for themselves. And that fast-approaching future clearly presaged the ending of colonialism by 1997, if not earlier.

But there was no way for me to raise such fundamental worries because they fell outside my immediate areas of responsibility. To attempt to do so would mark me as a member of the awkward squad if not as a potential subversive.

Nonetheless, I could foresee conflicts arising sooner or later, when I would be forced to take a stand. I concluded that should such an eventuality arise, I would have to align myself first and foremost with the interests of the people of Hong Kong rather than those of the British Crown. After all, local taxpayers were paying my salary.

It came to me in looking back on my studies about public administration that hardly any Western writer had touched upon the kind of predicament I faced. The conventional maxim was that civil servants ought to be neutral and execute whatever instructions they received from their political masters.

My contacts with civil servants from other parts of the world suggested that my type of predicament was really not uncommon. There were simply too many low quality and dishonest politicians around. Besides, what if political masters had attained power through gerrymandering or rigged elections or military coups? Would they command enough legitimacy for career civil servants to obey? And what if power had arisen out of a war of aggression and occupation?

Career civil servants — by the very fact they had chosen their particular calling — had to assume some responsibility for protecting their own community's best interests. They were also more likely to have better information at their disposal and greater understanding of the needs of their own people. It had to be fitting for them, under those circumstances, to assume the roles of either grey eminences or initiators of resistance.

Such developments have emerged in many countries plagued by coups and civil wars in recent decades. Even in stable societies, crises of conscience could arise. For example, senior British civil servants resigned in 1956 in protest against the British, French and Israeli conspiracy to seize the Suez Canal from Egypt contrary to international law. A number of American government employees and investigative journalists have also risked prison to expose unlawful acts by their governments. Whistleblowing has become more commonplace with advances in technology. Three cheers for Wikileaks! Such

developments ought to be encouraged and legally protected in democratic societies.

On the other hand, it should be remembered that every government has secrets that could not be disclosed till long after the event. For example, when one government enters negotiations with another government, it would be contrary to the national interest of both to openly disclose their respective negotiating positions. Even news of consideration being given to many government projects could be sensitive to markets.

But the sacrifices of high-minded civil servants and others in disclosing wrongdoings or corruption would lose much of their meaning if independent mass media were not receptive to carrying their disclosures to the wider public, so that the politicians and governments could be held to account, either criminally or the next time voters entered voting booths.

Unfortunately, government surveillance over the private lives of citizens has been steadily increasing at the same time that control of the mass media has slipped steadily into the hands of corporate oligarchs. Those dismal developments have given governments and corporations greater scope for distorting or fabricating facts for their own ends. How to secure greater personal liberties and to give the public access to impartial and uncensored news remain compelling challenges for free societies everywhere.

* * *

Thus I arrived at certain notions over the years of what the proper role of a civil servant ought to be. By the time Sir Murray MacLehose became Hong Kong's Governor in November of 1971, I was serving in the post of City District Commissioner for Hong Kong Island.

My first interface with Sir Murray came almost immediately and I have described what happened in Chapter 3. A remarkable outcome of that episode was that probably for the first and last time since the tramway system began

operations in 1904, a sitting Hong Kong Governor had ridden on a local tram and rubbed shoulders with ordinary citizens.

The next thing I heard was that the Governor had decided to splash out HK\$4.7 million to engage a firm of management consultants, McKinsey & Company, to re-organise and modernise the Secretariat. I, together with quite a number of my colleagues, doubted whether a management company would be up to dealing with the many contradictions and subtleties within a colonial occupation machine.

To me, Sir Murray's decision seemed a dismal augury for the future. The hard men in management consultancies were accustomed to crunching numbers, extrapolating from them, identifying efficiencies and squeezing out additional profitability. Public administration was not the application of a set of management tools, as some writers had suggested. Nor could it be a science, as others had grandiloquently claimed.

Administration — in my view — was an art, practised under haphazard and evolving circumstances. It involved some imagined future cluttered up with a mixture of intangibles, core beliefs, ancient traditions, modern abstractions and pure hunches. But human elements always had to be factored in. If some efficiencies could be attained only at the price of a loss in human-heartedness, then those efficiencies had best be lost. That approach called for sticking one's neck out and making individual judgements.

Given such early developments, I told myself to be prepared for the vagaries of a new broom. My hope was that in making a clean sweep he would not do away with too many of the good practices painfully accumulated over the decades.

* * *

My first difference of opinion with Sir Murray on a substantive policy issue concerned a matter which arose long before his arrival. It had its roots in the

1970 announcement by the Americans that they would end the occupation of Okinawa in 1972. In doing so, they intended to hand over to Japanese control also some uninhabited islands near Okinawa which had long been claimed by the Chinese, who called them the Diaoyu Tai Islands.

The American announcement provoked world-wide protests by Chinese students. Protests naturally occurred in Hong Kong as well. At first the local protests were small but momentum soon built up and the student leaders wanted to organise a much bigger demonstration at Victoria Park on the 7th of July in 1971. They sought police permission to hold the event but the police decided to bamboozle them with bureaucratic excuses to avoid creating a precedent for granting permission for such a politically tinged event. The background to that not altogether honourable decision by government has been set out in Chapter 2.

The net result was that an unlawful assembly took place and the police attempts to disperse the crowds led to rioting spilling out into the commercial areas of Causeway Bay. In its aftermath, the then Governor, Sir David Trench, instructed me to open a dialogue with student leaders to defuse the situation. I spent the next nine months conducting one-on-one conversations with more than 50 leaders of student unions and youth groups and reporting back after each occasion to Donald Luddington, the then Secretary for Home Affairs.

As time went by, the local student and youth leaders were left feeling confused, stitched up and let down by imperatives beyond their comprehension.

I could well relate to their frustrations. They were sincere, intelligent and idealistic lads, though naive and sometimes ill informed. Their colonial education had left them in a cultural state of semi-hibernation, with the plasticity of their identity being prodded this way and that by various parties but with none of them giving it a meaningful shape. They were being conditioned to some degree, like Pavlov's dogs or Skinner's rats, to a range of external stimuli which did not require them to think too much. They were thus left in limbo, vaguely perplexed as to why — as Chinese — they ought

to defer to white men presenting themselves as figures of authority.

Their education had thus cut them off from any significant understanding of their rich Chinese heritage and had barred them from drawing perspectives or solace therefrom. Their hearts and minds seemed to be sending conflicting messages, with their native culture ill-learned and a foreign culture ill-understood.

Dispirited and unsettled, they eventually decided to hold one final demonstration in May of 1972 — perhaps just for the sake of maintaining their collective “face” — before winding up their campaign. It would take the form of a march from Victoria Park to the Central district, to hand in protest letters to the American and Japanese Consulates-General. They therefore applied for permission to hold the march and, in order to avoid traffic disruptions and to preserve good public order, they also asked for a police escort along their route.

How their application was dealt with has been recorded in Chapter 3. I recommended that permission be granted but the government decided otherwise. But the march — now illegal — went ahead in any case. Nothing untoward occurred. Yet afterwards the government lacked the will or the courage to uphold the law by prosecuting the students. I thought failure to prosecute would bring the rule of law into disrepute. But nobody at the top of government supported my position.

* * *

With the ending of the local Diaoyu Tai campaign, my remit for holding conversations with student leaders came to an end. The meetings at Government House made plain the administration’s unwillingness to engage with the growing restlessness and irredentist inclinations among the young. Such reluctance would only store up trouble for the future.

I therefore wrote to Donald Luddington, recommending that a senior

Chinese Administrative Officer be appointed to continue the dialogues with student and youth leaders. The city's population was growing younger, I said, and the colonial education system was not helping their search for identity. A matured Chinese officer could well nudge them towards a less nihilistic and confrontational path.

Unfortunately, before Luddington could consider my recommendation, he got “kicked upstairs” in May of 1973 — to become the Governor of the Solomon Islands. So far as I could determine, Luddington's successor as Secretary for Home Affairs took no notice of my recommendation and simply left it to gather dust in some Secretariat pigeon-hole.

It could be no more than idle speculation now to wonder how relationships between the administration and the various uncivil and slogan-shouting sections of the Hong Kong young might be today if the government had acted upon my recommendation 46 years ago.

* * *

Sir Murray MacLehose ended his ten-and-a-half-year governorship of Hong Kong in May of 1982 to general acclaim. He was popular and well thought of among the local population. Apparently well thought of in London too, for he was elevated to the peerage, with a seat in the House of Lords.

Every biographical summary of Lord MacLehose's tenure as Governor features a long list of the things ascribed to his efforts. Those lists project an image of a progressive, benevolent and caring ruler. They usually begin with his turning Chinese into a second official language. Then came his ten-year public housing plan, his extension of compulsory secondary education from six to nine years, his cleansing of the colony's environment, his stamping out of police corruption and so on.

On the face of it, those lists look very impressive indeed. But are they factually correct? Or had they been tarted up by clever press officers using the

latest techniques in managing public relations and creating a positive spin?

I do not wish to begrudge any man his reputation, especially so long after that person has departed the scene and no longer able to speak for himself. Nor would I wish to stand in the way of anyone who wishes to maintain illusions about the deeds of colonisers and occupiers. All I care about is the historical truth for the people of Hong Kong, the place of my birth, the city to which I owed my working allegiances and the chosen home for my family for the last five generations. Myths can distort the thinking of subsequent generations; the truth — hopefully might set them a little more thoughtful and freer.

To the best of my knowledge, no forensic examination of Lord MacLehose's record as a Governor has yet been made. I hope some day an enterprising doctoral candidate would do a dissertation on the noble lord, setting out his fit and proper place in Hong Kong's history.

Until that day comes, let me throw a few random observations into the pot for those who might have an interest in local history and similar matters. Many developments in the city have been cavalierly and not always accurately attributed to Sir Murray. One of them is that he made Chinese into a second official language. That claim is, on the face of it, factually correct in the sense that legislation was passed during his governorship. But to leave that as a bald statement would give rise to a number of false imputations about Sir Murray's progressiveness.

The background to the move has been set out in Chapter 7. If that had been taken into account, together with Sir Murray's lack of concrete action to promote the spirit of that legislation, a truer measure of the Governor's attitude might be arrived at. Years after the passage of the legislation, the recruitment and promotion boards in some government departments still remained entirely composed of expatriates using only English.

When Sir John Cowperthwaite retired as Hong Kong's Financial Secretary in 1971, he left the public purse in a very healthy state. Sir Murray became Governor at the end of that same year. When he noted the hefty coffers, he swiftly announced a ten-year public housing programme.

But in doing so, he overlooked one piece of advice Sir John had consistently preached, that is, successful projects required not only money but also the right intellectual resources. By then, the more seasoned administrators were also retiring left, right and centre, leaching the bureaucracy of some of its best brainpower. That diminishing pool of talent left the housing programme with a forest of unanswered and perhaps unanswerable questions. If the programme had been even half successful, would affordable housing remain such a major problem in the city today?

Housing is a fundamental human need. It would be unwise for any government to approach the problem as merely a matter of putting roofs over people's heads. Actually, housing goes to the heart of where a society aspires to be in the future, in terms of family structure, environmental enjoyment, social cohesion, urban isolation and loneliness, care for the aged, public security, the upbringing of future generations, employment opportunities, transportation needs, foreseeable challenges like energy, water and food scarcity and so on. It is a quest for both physical and spiritual space, so that the individual and his family could grow and prosper.

A vision embracing all those various elements has still to be clearly enunciated by latter-day political leaders. They might begin by first changing the language. Why speak of new towns when what was really needed was the creation of new and closer-knitted communities to counter the reckless and dangerous drift towards alienating and unmanageable urbanisation?

* * *

Another intriguing conundrum also arose in respect of Sir Murray's decision

to extend compulsory secondary education from six to nine years. Could it be considered an improvement for Chinese children to have nine years of a compulsory but misguided colonialist education instead of only six?

The objective situation of the time was pretty clear. Most Chinese parents had since time immemorial sought the best available education for their children, even if that education was not what they ideally would like. Colonial syllabuses have always been geared to producing pliant subjects capable of discharging the functions required by their foreign masters and their local mercantile collaborators. Producing thinking and questioning citizens was far from their thoughts. Thus those syllabuses, fashioned since the early days of the colony, had been in need of drastic revision for ages — and particularly with the advent of 1997. Besides, shortages in good schools and good teachers had been patent for a long time. All the top schools, be they government or aided missionary ones, had been lumbered with long waiting lists.

The Education Department, led for decades by blinkered expatriates, had a long history of appalling incompetence and scandals. If there was a genuine desire to provide high quality education, the first priority ought to have been replacing the leadership in the educational establishment.

In the absence of that reform, what could an increase in secondary school places amount to? A predictably lame result — the “purchase” of places from some private secondary schools. Many of the schools with spare capacity were known locally as “school shops” for they were considered educationally sub-standard. They took in students fast and furiously, so long as parents were prepared to pay the fees. So to go from six years to nine years of compulsory schooling would often mean three more years of an unsatisfactory out-of-date education.

* * *

A great deal of Sir Murray’s reputation in Hong Kong and elsewhere has been associated with his establishment of the Independent Commission Against

Corruption in 1974. I have already dealt with how Sir Murray had handled some of the Commission's various initial hiccups in Chapter 14, so I do not intend to repeat myself. I would say, however, that while the ICAC has been successful in reducing certain more obvious forms of civil service corruption, it has failed to tackle others, like the dubious distribution of secret slush funds recounted in Chapter 16.

Neither do I believe the ICAC is adequately equipped to deal with the rampant money-laundering, tax evasion and international fixing of LIBOR, foreign exchange and other rates which affect countless millions of ordinary citizens around the globe.

It would require an enormous amount of naivety to believe that all the major international banks and other corporate entities forking out hundreds of millions in fines to European and American regulatory bodies for misdeeds to settle potential law suits did not have Hong Kong collaborators. How regulatory authorities can dig through all their off-shore subsidiaries, their off-balance sheet accounting and the other forms of legalistic trickeries they employ remain daunting challenges.

When one hears foreign economic gurus and fund managers wearing Armani suits praise Hong Kong as "one of the best cities in the world for doing business" one can be confident they are not talking about setting up *wonton* noodle stalls. They would be addressing those with big bucks, reassuring them that the territory's banking secrecy rules and the availability of the services of expert lawyers and accountants would ensure that their wealth and their activities would be as well shielded from prying eyes as if they were in Switzerland or the United States.

* * *

Some biographical accounts of Sir Murray also credit him for initiating the "Keep Hong Kong Clean" campaign, among other things. In actual fact, the

“Keep Hong Kong Clean” campaign was started by the Urban Council in conjunction with the 28th Exhibition of Hong Kong Products in 1970, well before Sir Murray took up his governorship. Sir Murray merely continued to support the programme. That is quite a different matter from initiating it.

Until a forensic study of Sir Murray’s governorship has been done, it is difficult to comment meaningfully on his overall legacy. I would, however, like to refer briefly to one other aspect of Sir Murray’s activities.

Sir Murray, at the start of his governorship, was so keen to recruit more Administrative Officers that he overlooked the risks of deteriorating standards. The danger was probably never brought to his attention by any of the bureaucrats at the top. The chickens came home to roost at the tail end of his administration in 1981, when he discovered he had nobody suitable in the service to fill the important post of Financial Secretary. He then had to break with tradition to secure the services of the Swire Group taipan, John Bremridge, to fill the vacancy. That represented one of Sir Murray’s better decisions.

Bremridge was an excellent choice. He was a very thoughtful, decent and knowledgeable man who did Hong Kong proud in both the private and public sectors. Some wider questions which might be pondered under those circumstances include: Why had Sir Murray not thought of this deficiency sooner? Was he too blinded by the yes-men around him to see the need for better thinkers and more creative staff throughout the service?

There were plenty of civic minded and qualified Chinese in the private sector more than willing to give up their hefty incomes to serve the community. Why had they not been tapped? They would be admirable in such sectors as education and public works. In fact, they had already established a long tradition of serving without pay on the Executive and Legislative Councils and in various voluntary bodies for over a century. Had they been ruled out simply because they were of the Chinese race and hence could not be relied upon to serve British interests first and foremost? A question worth probing.

* * *

In governments, things often happen under their own momentum. A good idea may get out of hand, however, and turn into something quite bad. Take for example the sensible concept of legal aid for the poor. I can remember that the legal aid outfit started as little more than a man and a boy in an out-of-the-way office somewhere. By 1978, the Legal Aid Department provided legal aid for 67% of the population. I do not know what it covers now but it does appear a great many people are abusing the system by launching frivolous litigation.

The trend to settle disputes through legal remedies would appear to be contrary to the Chinese way of handling disputes. In the past a whole range of issues relating to family life, inheritances, adoptions, and so forth could be settled through customary practices. It seems a pity that respect for elders and for Chinese traditions are not what they used to be. Otherwise many disputes could have been mediated without resorting to courts.

Who is responsible for steadily wiping away traditional practices to substitute them with litigation? Is that a natural heritage of colonialism? Hong Kong society now appears to be becoming almost as litigious as America. A sorry development. A study of its roots should also be enlightening.

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Oscar Wilde once said that everybody owed History a duty to rewrite it. Well, I have used up my two cents' worth on the governance of Hong Kong during the time of Sir Murray MacLehose. I will leave it to others to pick up any further narrative.