

**Hong Kong's CE Race: About over
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Leung Chun-ying could be named by default

Hong Kong's chief executive selection process was restored to a semblance of order last week after Beijing's original choice, former Chief Secretary for Administration Henry Tang, basically made himself unselectable.

Beijing did not anticipate skeletons leaping out of the cupboards of their two approved candidates. Due diligence was overlooked. Even less did they anticipate Tang being so inept at handling a series of crises including having dug himself an illegal basement structure at the same time he was in charge of policing illegal structures, costing him respect and credibility.

Because Tang was lost beyond rescue and because property surveyor Leung Chun-Ying was not favored by the city's oligarchs and its powerful civil service, two more hopefuls almost joined the race - which would have made the circus spin out of control.

The selection criteria requires the winning candidate to secure at least 601 votes from the electoral college of 1,200. Multiple contenders would have messed the carefully calibrated calculus. That was not in the script.

Tsang Yok-sing, president of the Legislative Council, pulled out just before nominations closed. He was advised to do so. The pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong, or DAB had 'reserved' a block of 140 votes pending his decision.

Regina Ip failed to secure the minimum 150 nominations from tycoons, functional constituencies and the DAB - Beijing's largest above-ground representatives in the Legislative Council and a potent voting block in the Election Committee for chief executive. The baggage Ip carries made the puppet masters nervous. No nod for her.

This was a moment of truth for the former secretary for security, who fancied herself the most competent chief executive choice. The DAB has not forgiven her ingratitude after being gifted its support in the 2008 Hong Kong Island constituency election. The professional constituencies showed her the door.

Oligarchs want Henry to stay. Citizens say nay

It was a disastrous few weeks for Henry Tang. But despite negative feedback from the daily press, disillusioned supporters and the polls, candidate Tang carries on like nothing happened.

The 18 Feb edition of The Economist has him as the "sort of amiable, vaguely trustworthy duffer..." which sums up Henry.

At the first debate held 3 March featuring the three chief executive hopefuls at City University, before a 500-strong audience of the public and environmental activists, the post-debate votes re-confirmed Henry Tang's rejection - he got 2 percent whereas CY

Leung received 63 percent while Albert Ho of the Democratic Party had 23 percent.

Everyone knows that the Democratic Party is unacceptable to Beijing. Albert Ho had earlier jokingly told the Financial Times of London that if he ever got selected by the 1,200 electoral college, it would be finally revealed that he is a mole of the Communist Party.

It will be a huge relief for Hong Kong to be spared Henry Tang. China has to whisper to the selectors accordingly. It cannot risk another massive street march like the 2003 outrage which felled Tung Chee-hwa and Regina Ip for attempting to pass into legislation the flawed Article 23 Security Bill, which would have done away with significant legal and human rights freedoms.

It proved even then that a rubber-stamp legislature to enforce Beijing's diktat in Hong Kong is not the way to rule. The territory's citizens are acutely aware of their rights and will face down any government that schemes to whittle away its existing freedoms of assembly, protest and press. So long as Hong Kong is denied the universal franchise promised in the Basic Law, its citizens will remain suspicious and super-vigilant.

Public unforgiving of oligarch-govt collusion

There is a sea-change in public attitudes to the privileged elites. Their ability to flout rules which ordinary citizens have to live by is being aggressively challenged.

The widening wealth gap, unaffordable housing, lack of a safety net for the poorest and enormous budget surpluses not being used to address systemic problems, all rankle. It speaks of an administration badly out of touch with the people it rules.

The rough treatment incumbent chief executive Donald Tsang got in the press and in the Legislative Council for sneakily consorting with tycoons aboard luxury yachts and private jets, and accepting a penthouse below market rent for retirement, was a signal lesson for legislators, civil servants and the next chief executive.

The simmering resentment against big business-government collusion has erupted too strongly for a return to 'business as usual'.

CY Leung right man at the right time?

Hong Kong lost 15 years through incompetent leaders appointed by Beijing. Tung Chee-hwa was a washout and Donald Tsang a nervous schoolboy waiting to be scolded on 'work-report' trips to Beijing. He will be thrashed royally this time round.

Neither had the charisma, conviction nor confidence to drive policies forward to make Hong Kong a better place for its residents. Henry Tang if selected, would stretch that dismal record to 20 years of trading water.

The scandals that crushed Tang's ambition and ruined Tsang's legacy, did enormous good in surfacing fundamental issues about the purpose of government and public accountability of officials.

CY Leung has conducted a measured and dignified campaign so far. Accusations of conflict of interest from 10 years ago in the process of bidding for the West Kowloon project* across the harbor from the Central District, which seem to have been blown out of proportion by government officials eager to help out the property oligarchs by smearing his campaign, didn't rile the public as badly as Henry Tang's illegal basement and limp denials.

CY is not damned. He has invested serious time visiting the grass-roots to appreciate the needs of the neglected sectors of HK society. He is thoughtful, does his homework and crafts programs which he should now be articulating more forcefully. It is these very qualities which make the oligarchs nervous.

Leung does not need to keep proving his loyalty to Beijing - a constant distraction which drained Donald Tsang. If anyone can speak for Hong Kong and be heard in Beijing, Leung can.

No time to waste

Budget surpluses are there to be deployed judiciously for social good and equitable economic growth. That is a principle the property and construction cartels vehemently oppose. They would rather pour concrete for highways, runways, railways and bridges at huge public expense whether needed or not.

It is the public purse that the cartels in each of these industries scheme to stream into their pockets with the collusion of government. It is time for Hong Kong to plot a new course. The cozy government-big business nexus has to be curbed. A fairer distribution of opportunity and access has to include a broader swathe of small entrepreneurs and medium sized businesses. Housing affordability for the poor and the middle class has to be addressed. It is just too fundamental to be neglected any longer. What about the irresponsible 20-year dodge on improving air quality and reducing traffic pollution? What about fair competition rules to bust cartels?

What about the wasteful Trade Development Corporation running trade exhibitions which the private sector can manage without government subsidies?

If Leung addresses these long-neglected issues in a forthright way, he can reinvigorate Hong Kong and gain the respect of its business sector and residents. He has to carry a big stick to get the civil service moving. They are masters at forming committees to 'study' issues and waste time as a tactic for inaction.

He must find a competent and respected chief secretary to replace the woefully inadequate and inarticulate Stephen Lam. He will need an effective civil service overlord who can lead projects, inspire teams and make things happen at speed.

There are also too many consultants feeding at the trough. It will be useful to make all their reports open to public scrutiny. Why should consultant reports on public projects remain government secrets? How many of these consultants are proxies for big business interests?

Is the practice of hiring consultants for every new initiative necessary? Is the civil service

incapable of evaluating projects and implementing action plans? CY has to hack through all that fast.

The next chief executive has his work cut out for him. If he gets his act together quickly he can re-energize Hong Kong. He may even get reelected by a landslide through universal franchise in 2017. The one mistake he should not make is to revive the Article 23 Security Bill which HK citizens unequivocally rejected in 2003.

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