

SHA's speech in Radio 3's "Letter to Hong Kong" (English only)

Following is the speech by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Dr Patrick Ho, in "Letter to Hong Kong" of RTHK's Radio Three this (May 7) morning:

Dear Elsie (Tu),

I enjoy reading your recently published joint autobiography you wrote with late Andrew, Shouting at the Mountain.

While this may sound like a Chinese proverb, I understand it was a parable coined expressly to denote the frustration you so frequently experienced when your efforts to seek reforms fell upon the deaf ears of the former colonial administration.

As you remind us in that memoir, "My decision to enter into politics fulfilled my father's old ambition that I should work for the underprivileged through the political system".

I'm not going to suggest that "The Mountain" is shouting back, but I would like to humbly point out that times have changed, and that it is now not only listening but responding. The Government had last week begun a three-month public consultation on District Council Review.

To quote a genuine and well-known Chinese proverb, the longest journey begins with the first step, and since you set our feet on that road there have been many such steps, so that the journey is already far advanced.

Nevertheless there are still critics who contend we are moving too little and too slowly. I would answer them by saying that the delegation of administrative powers is not a move to be undertaken lightly, which is why our administration must bestow such authority with care.

I trust therefore that you and others eager for fresh innovations in our political process, will welcome our proposal to begin this process with important new responsibilities for our District Councils.

Under our proposals, 18 District Councils will be involved in the management of more than 1,700 district facilities, including libraries, swimming pools, leisure grounds and community halls.

This results from the fact that we have been looking at these District Councils again, to see how we can further improve the effectiveness of the valuable and important contribution they make to Hong Kong affairs.

The District Councils have long been fundamental components of the very special nature of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region; very much part and parcel of our system of governance.

Our objective is to enhance their role, involving them in the management of district facilities that cater to a wide variety of public needs.

In his recent policy address the Chief Executive stated: "It is essential that public policies are effectively implemented at the district level". To achieve this, the Government will strengthen the role of District Officers so that they can better respond to the demands of the people.

As further promised by the Chief Executive, we will also seek to improve the co-ordination function of District Management Committees, so as to better provide cross-departmental services in districts. This will refine and heighten our capacity to resolve problems and deal with issues concerning people's livelihood.

I hasten to point out here that District Council reform is not just about involving these bodies in the management of certain district facilities or services or giving them extra resource. Essentially we are looking to reinvent them so that they become a focal point of district governance and a close partner of the Government in providing services that best meet the needs of the local population.

We are capable of formulating well-founded opinions based on the information we acquire from many diverse sources. And I feel we deserve the opportunity to contribute these opinions to the collective "sounding board" which this community is capable of providing.

We aim therefore to give the public more accessible channels of communication with their district councillors, and to encourage the latter to be better listeners, so that

they, in turn, can become spokespersons for those they represent.

This will require the councillors to expand both their vision and their sense of commitment to the community they serve, and to make a direct contribution to the way in which this community is governed. We will call upon their firm dedication to engage in community governance from the bottom up.

We also recognise that the reinvention of district governance must entail a corresponding reform of the administrative machinery. All major government departments significantly involved in providing services at the local level should ensure that their officers respond more quickly and flexibly to local demands.

That is why the Government will set up a Steering Committee on District Administration as a forum for heads of the relevant departments to collaborate in resolving inter-departmental district management problems.

And to strengthen communication between the Government and the District Councils, heads of the departments will be required to attend District Council meetings at regular intervals. The Chief Executive will also chair an annual District Administration Summit to discuss the development of district administration from a “people-oriented” angle.

The relevant departments will follow the decisions of District Councils in managing such facilities, within the limits of their existing statutory powers and of the resources available.

We are now looking to the public to suggest improvements for their district facilities. There are all kinds of ways in which they can do this. For example, whether one is a parent, health conscious, a nature lover, a retiree or a pet-lover, I am sure that many of us have things we would like to see done to improve our district facilities and services.

Once these new mechanisms are in place, we will see the dawn of a new era through the involvement of District Councils in the management of all these community facilities.

To ensure that proposals for enhancement of District Council functions are put into effect in a timely manner, the Government will create an annual provision of

\$300 million for District Councils to carry out minor work projects and increase District Council funds to an annual provision of \$300 million to organise community involvement projects and leisure and sports programmes.

We will also raise District Council members' honorarium and operating expenses allowances by 10% and introduce new allowances. We will introduce a financial assistance scheme for District Council election candidates to encourage participation in public elections.

As you pointed out in your memoir, you have been a great supporter of District Council elections. May I draw on your continued support, seeing that the District Councils will have a bigger role to play in Hong Kong affairs.

Patrick

End/Sunday, May 7, 2006