

## Hong Kong and the Democracy Debate

By James Tien

Let me make my position plain from the start – I am in favour of democracy in Hong Kong. As a former British wartime leader once remarked, democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

The issue for Hong Kong is how to get from A to B, i.e., the designing of a roadmap, and eventually a timetable, for achieving universal suffrage. It is worth reflecting that when Winston Churchill spoke his famous words on the subject in 1947, Churchill's Britain was a proud democracy – but in its remaining colonies, including Hong Kong, universal suffrage was nothing but a distant dream.

Previously, Hong Kong was ruled by a governor appointed 8000 miles away in London, and the people of the territory had precious little say in the way the colony was run. There was progress in the intervening years but Hong Kong was a long way from achieving being able to call itself a democracy when the sun set on British rule in 1997.

The reason I want to put Hong Kong's situation into a historical perspective is that it seems that people forget too easily how far we have come. It is surprising, too, that how many people wrongly assume that Hong Kong was an oasis of freedom and democracy before the end of British colonial rule. It wasn't.

Similarly, people overseas and even within our city too often seem to assume that all Hong Kong has to do to progress politically is take a quick show of hands, flick a switch and then the golden light of democracy and universal suffrage will flood benevolently into all our lives, bringing eternal sunshine and happiness. If only life were so simple.

The central issue is that, whatever our geography, Hong Kong is politically not an island. Hong Kong is a part of China, the world's biggest developing economy and possibly its most complex political enigma, whilst its leaders strive, with varying degrees of success, to modernize and bring wealth to the masses while at the same time remaining true to socialist principles.

What we do in Hong Kong does not just affect the 6.8 million citizens of our own territory. It reverberates around a nation of 1.3 billion people, a quarter of all the people in the world. What happens in our small city can set off ripples that spread out thousands of miles beyond our own little jurisdiction.

Today, I believe, Hong Kong has made a start and has achieved more democracy than under British rule. Fifty percent of Legislative Councillors are directly elected, whereas pre-1997 only one-third were. We have a privileged arrangement with Beijing, i.e. "One Country, Two Systems". "One Country, Two Systems" is being successfully implemented as proven by the fact that Hong Kong is a free society under which the rule of law, and our freedoms, human

rights and an independent judiciary have been preserved and maintained. Crucially, under our mini-constitution, the Basic Law, we have the opportunity to develop democracy step-by-step and move towards the goal of universal suffrage.

However, as Hong Kong is not a sovereign entity, according to the Chinese Constitution and the Basic Law it is necessary for us to achieve consensus within Hong Kong on any proposal for constitutional changes, and for such proposal to receive Beijing's endorsement.

Sadly, there are occasions when the need for cool heads have been forgotten – occasions when it would appear that we have squandered our advantage rather than think carefully and calmly before deciding how we should use it. That unfortunate propensity has, in the past 12 months, stalled our progress towards universal suffrage.

Last year, we had an opportunity to make Hong Kong's electoral system more democratic. The Hong Kong Government put forth a proposed package to incorporate over 500 District Councillors, mostly directly elected, into the Election Committee for returning the Chief Executive, and to allow these District Councillors to return an additional five members to the Legislative Council. In addition, another five Legislative Council Members would be returned through direct geographical elections.

The proposals were modest but progressive reforms, and they were undoubtedly a substantive move towards the right direction. Crucially from Beijing's perspective, the reforms were in line with what the Basic Law has prescribed, i.e. to achieve universal suffrage in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress. For these reasons, I and my colleagues in the Liberal Party endorsed the package and gave it our wholehearted support.

Even though a majority of legislators voted in favour of Government's package, it wasn't enough. Under the rules for constitutional changes in Hong Kong, a two-thirds majority was required. With the opposition camp voting en masse against them, that majority was unattainable and the reforms were doomed. Because the opposition camp took this stance, Hong Kong's electoral system remains at a standstill. There was substantial public support for this package. According to different opinion polls, some 60% of the population supported the package before its veto. According to the most recent poll conducted by the Hong Kong Baptist University, 50% of the Hong Kong public blame the opposition camp for the current stalemate.

Thus, it was the cruelest of ironies that the opposition camp brought defeat for the reforms i.e. the legislators who professed to want universal suffrage and political liberty at the very heart of their mission refused to accept this dosage of democracy. Whilst the opposition camp seemed to have scored a spectacular "victory" by defeating Government's package, that "victory" had brought the opposition camp nothing but decline in popularity. Opinion polls show a marked decline in public support for the opposition camp since they had voted down Government's package which had the majority support in the community. The opposition camp have ended up shooting themselves in the foot.

Members from the opposition camp were of course entitled to vote according to their beliefs. They were perfectly within their rights, as elected representatives, to say no to the reforms if they did not wholeheartedly support them and did not believe that they went as far as they wanted them to. However, politics, particularly in China, is a complicated dance that requires tactical steps and flexibility to achieve longer-term goals. It is hard to

understand why the opposition camp failed to see the bigger picture. The opposition camp actually made a most serious political misjudgment. Not only had they missed the opportunity to achieve more democracy for Hong Kong, but much more seriously they had burnt their bridges for further dialogue with Beijing on longer term plans for achieving universal suffrage. The opposition camp stated that they demand a universal suffrage timetable but, by refusing last year's package, they had made this quite impossible to achieve – at least for now!

Before the vote was taken last year, I warned in a newspaper column of the consequences of failing to support the package, however much they might fall short of our more optimistic expectations. I warned that the people of Hong Kong would not thank us for scuppering political development in the territory. I take no pleasure whatsoever in having been proved right.

Next year will see not only the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our return to Chinese sovereignty but also an election for the Chief Executive. Many media and political commentators expect to see Mr Donald Tsang returned for a second term. My hope is that the anniversary and the election can bring us new hope for constitutional development in moving towards universal suffrage.

The Liberal Party supports implementing universal suffrage for the Chief Executive first, and if possible, by 2012. Thereafter, universal suffrage for the Legislative Council can be brought about in phases by replacing the 30 functional constituency seats with other directly elected seats. Whilst our position may or may not receive support amongst other parties concerned, my earnest hope is that as and when we have another opportunity to push for more democratic progress in Hong Kong between 2007 and 2012, the opposition camp and other colleagues in the Legislative Council will all act together to make progress a reality.

As the saying goes: “In politics, there are no permanent enemies; there are no permanent friends; there are only permanent interests”. The most permanent interest is turning the democratic aspirations of Hong Kong people into reality.

All of us who are engaged in Hong Kong's political life must also heed the saying that politics is the art of the possible. So, let us strive to build consensus between Hong Kong and Beijing. The Liberal Party is prepared to do what we can, and I call on other political parties in Hong Kong to do likewise. ■

**James Tien Pei-chu** is chairman of the Liberal Party of Hong Kong and a member of its Legislative Council, representing the geographical constituency of New Territories East. He is also chairman of Legco's Panel on Economic Services and a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. A businessman who holds two American university degrees in chemical engineering, Mr. Tien is chairman of Manhattan Holding Ltd. and Manhattan Garments (International) Ltd. of Hong Kong.