Views on the Patten Political Plan

Mr. Patten has challenged anyone who does not agree with his political package to "put up or shut up". I presume that remark applies to the general public, as he must know that the Chinese leaders cannot put up any proposals. Mr. Lu Ping has said more than once that he cannot make proposals before 1997 because until then Hong Kong is under British jurisdiction, and if he does make proposals he will immediately be told not to interfere before then. So it is up to us Hong Kong people to put up proposals, and this I now do.

There are two reasons why I disagree with the proposed Functional Constituencies.

(1) They include most of the voters of the geographical constituencies, resulting in two votes for about 70% of the population and only one for the remaining 30%. It cannot be democratic that some members of the community are less represented than the majority of the others. That is little better than some having one vote and others none.

(2) The Patten Plan loses the whole purpose of functional constituencies. Functional constituencies were intended to introduce expertise into the legislature in the early stages of democracy. If we are honest with ourselves, those of us who sit on the Legislative Council must admit that the functional representatives have been a great asset because of their expert input. While I see some benefit in expanding functional constituencies to those with real expertise and experience, such as registered social workers in the Social Welfare constituency (as in the teaching profession), I see no benefit in including all workers in the constituencies as proposed by Mr. Patten. His proposal would simply create another platform for political parties but would not necessarily bring in the expertise that the functional
constituencies were intended to provide. It has been interpreted that the Patten Plan is direct election by the back door. Whether or not that is true only the Governor himself knows. If we are ready for direct elections in the functional constituency area I would prefer a front rather than the muddled back-door method. But in our young democracy, are we ready to dispense with the expert work these members have been doing?

Countries that have taken a sudden plunge into full democracy have recently been proved to be ineffective, either through lack of experience, or because political power struggle has taken over. We can learn from their mistakes but must not copy them. We can already see the danger of political power struggle, when one member of the Legislative Council tells some members they should resign because they do not support the Patten Plan, and another publicly proposes that the Chairman of the House Committee should resign for the same reason. Those who criticise other countries for purging political dissidents should beware of doing the same when they are in power themselves. Obviously we still need political maturity as well as expert knowledge.

I would now like to offer some tentative proposals on five functional constituencies, subject to their feasibility. Others will no doubt have views on the remaining four.

(1) We have a few women on the Legislative Council, but no one is specifically dedicated to the task of representing women. I therefore propose that there should be a Women's Constituency with a representative chosen by women's organisations.

(2) We have a number of social workers, mostly directly elected, on the Council. We need one who is dedicated to the task of policy-making for that most neglected sector of our community, the handicapped and the infirm. Such a constituency would include all those who work among the handicapped and infirm.
(3) The same argument holds for environmentalists, that no one Councillor is dedicated to this task. I think our present concern for the environment merits one Councillor dedicated to this area. I am not certain, however, whether there are sufficient organisations to form such a constituency but this could possibly be remedied.

(4) Likewise we need a constituency for the arts and sports. There are enough organisations in this field to form a constituency, and indeed some have already requested such a means of representation.

(5) If the voting age is lowered to 18, I consider that the interests of our young people could be represented by forming a student constituency among student unions of all schools and colleges who could then elect their own representative.

In my estimation these proposed constituencies would contribute a great deal to the quality of life and understanding of the needs of wide areas in our community. Surely this would be democracy at its best, and would eliminate the political bickering and power grabbing as well as time wasting and inefficiency that inevitably result from party systems alone.

Now I come to the other plank in Mr. Patten's plan with which I disagree. I see the reasons why he has proposed the composition but I consider his conclusions wrong, probably because he failed to consult widely enough. In truth, I find the Election Committee a very strange political animal. The simple way would have been to have ten directly elected seats instead. In fact, the Basic Law proposes to eliminate the Election Committee and replace these seats with directly elected ones by the year 2003. In the meantime I think we can put up with ten elected by an Election Committee. We cannot complain if we have to wait eight years for those ten elected seats, since we waited a hundred and fifty years to reach the first eighteen directly elected seats in 1991. In fact, had it not been for the approach of 1997 we would not even have had those eighteen, either now or in the foreseeable future, as Britain has never agreed to democracy for Hong Kong.
Mr. Patten created the first obstacle by proposing to eliminate all appointed members of District Boards and Municipal Councils in 1995. His great mistake was not to consult the 300 or so persons concerned. I personally cannot speak on behalf of the District Boards or the Regional Council because that is not my business, but I have consulted the Urban Council which it is my duty to do. This consultation took place long before Mr. Patten came on the scene, and has been confirmed since he made his speech. The Urban Council has more than 50% elected members. Some represent the ten urban District Boards and are themselves either directly elected to the District Boards or indirectly elected from them. In a vote taken in a full meeting of the Urban Council, 75% were opposed to eliminating all appointed members on the grounds that they were providing useful expertise. Appointed members are no longer the yes-men who used to vote en bloc on every issue. The majority of Members support a phasing out of appointed members at the rate of five at every election, and this would give time to build up the necessary expertise we require for our work, namely doctors, architects, engineers, experts in culture and sports and accountants or managers, almost all of whom are at present appointed members.

As to the proposal to set up the Election Committee composed only of elected members of District Boards, the public may be able to judge whether it is wise to put the power to elect ten Legislative Councillors in the hands of about 300 persons all from a closely-knit group. I understand Mr. Patten's argument that these 300 have themselves been elected and should therefore represent every district. But in fact how many do they really represent? Only 17% of those adults eligible to register as voters take part in elections. That the remaining 83% have not registered to vote could mean that they are not interested, or that they have no faith in any political system. No one knows the views of this large silent majority. What we do know is that we elected members can claim to represent the public in only a limited way judged by election turnouts.
As I have said, an Election Committee is an unknown animal, so my proposal does not claim to be a final solution. The only final solution will be the ten seats being directly elected in the year 2003. I suggest that the net for the Election Committee be cast more widely than only District Boards. They could include a variety of bodies known to be civic-minded and as far as possible with differing views and backgrounds. District Boards could be one sector, but at the risk of being called an advocate for China, I think the proposals in the Basic Law provide a fair basis, on condition that this is only for the transition period until the ten seats are directly elected.

I have been involved on the political scene for 30 years, and hope that in that time I have learned from experience, without becoming undemocratic as some have acrimoniously accused me of being. I believe that an elected system gives the community "the best of all bad systems" as someone has said. I cannot, from experience, claim that elected members have necessarily done a better job than appointed members. With such a small electorate, only 17% of the adult population, it is comparatively easy to win a seat by personal contacts without necessarily doing a good job on the duties of a council.

I must declare publicly that the needs of the whole community are and always have been my concern, and I have never pandered to people to get their votes. I have never, in all my 30 years of public service suggested a sudden plunge into democracy, but have always proposed a step by step approach. My experience on both the Urban and Legislative Councils have only confirmed my view that democracy is only as good as the persons who are elected to put it into action. The danger lies in forsaking democracy in order to further the interests of political parties.

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