

Tim Hamlett's Hong Kong

A veteran journalist and Baptist University academic, Tim looks at the issues facing the city. E-mail him at hamlett@hkbu.edu.hk



was going to keep off the new political appointees. I mean everyone else has done it; what else is there to say? Well there is plenty more to say because official defenders of the new sinecures just will not shut up. Last week one of them defended the very generous salaries offered to the new bunch of wonderkids on the grounds that some of them have degrees from Oxford and Cambridge. This was not a good idea. Never mind about an Oxbridge degree: you would have to be a full professor at a local university to get within smelling distance of the pay for political assistants, never mind the undersecretaries. An Oxford degree is valuable, but not that valuable. Take it from a proud owner. But this is hardly worth pursuing.

We know they are overpaid and we know why. Working for a puppet municipal administration is not an intrinsically attractive prospect. By paying generously we can expand our field of possible candidates to include the underpaid and the greedy.

What really got up my nostrils, though, was the gentleman (the quote was not attributed directly but

A quick stab at the internet ("political ability" has 8 million Google hits) discloses that Lysistrata and Bismarck had it, but Epaminondas did not, whoever he was. Jeremy Paxman's admirable book on (British) politicians tries hard to find some common qualities in them, without really succeeding. Their only outstanding odd feature is that a disproportionate number of them lost one or both parents at an early age. I rather doubt that the stringent selection process included any mention of this point. Indeed, I rather doubt it included anything to the point at all. If it was stringent, it was not about political ability, and if it was about political ability, it was not stringent.

I do not suggest, of course, that the candidates had no previous experience relevant to their new jobs. The gentleman who used to work for the Jockey Club should find his experience of the finer points of horse manure very handy in the upper reaches of the administration. But politics is the art of getting elected and getting things done. As nobody involved in the selection process seems to have any experience of getting elected, one can have little confidence in that part of it. Actually, civil servants are very bad at spotting electability and usually do not try. There was a period towards the end of the British Empire when large numbers of colonial governments tried to select and groom their successors. This was not a success. In most cases the chosen successor lost the first available election to someone who had spent the pre-independence period in prison.

As for getting things done, the political approach is through persuasion and leadership. The effective politician gets what he wants by persuading us that we all want it. Unfortunately, this is not the way things are done in the Hong Kong government, which has been infected by the notion that effective managers get things done by being extremely unpleasant to their subordinates. This is not a legacy of British civil service habits, in which "do it" comes out as "would you be kind enough to", and in an emergency they may add "when it's convenient", which means "now".

But I digress. The point is that, as Frank Harris put it, no man can see above his own level. Who, in the upper ranks of our government, seems to you to be a man or woman who could be trusted to spot political ability? The ability to be appointed, or to be appointed by the appointee, is not a political skill. It demands nothing more than dexterity with the shoe brush. So who decided which of the many candidates had political ability? Probably the same political dimwit who decided that it would not matter if many of them had overseas passports.

CitySeen

with Andrew Sun. Additional reporting by Clara Mak. Send tips, tickets and invitations to andrew.sun@scmp.com



Glammed up gals gush over gowns in Fab Four's big screen outing

The movie theatres were filled with gals - and gay men - last week as the "labels" and "love" seeking ladies of Hong Kong went in droves to catch up with their favourite four TV characters from *Sex And The City*. In fact, it seemed screening after screening were group-booked by gaggles of gals, some reportedly smuggling in containers filled with cosmetics and cupcakes.

One of the largest was organised by motivational speaker Pia Muggerud (third from left, with girlfriends Dana Urmonas, Jennifer Halley and Jules Peedom), who

gathered in total 64 female friends to see the film at Elements' Grand Cinema. Everyone in the girl gang glammed up as if they were one of the Manhattan-ites and oooh'd and aaah'd with the movie's display of couture gowns and shoes.

"It was such a fun night. What better excuse to get dressed up?" Ms Muggerud, asked. "We took over a bar in Elements afterwards, except for a few shy men at the back. The bar ran out of cocktail glasses to serve cosmopolitans so we had to turn to wine glasses. As for the movie, of course, it delivered on all counts."

Caprice offers food and four-door day for dad

Father's Day is this Sunday and if you really want to splurge and impress pops, have your credit card limit increased for the Four Season Hotel's big lunch promotion. Befitting its posh reputation, the hotel's French restaurant Caprice has teamed up with a sports car dealer so dad can indulge in a bit of mid-life vamp. It's now taking bookings for the fancy four-course lunch for the day - which

features the calorie-rich menu of green pea gazpacho with mozzarella cream and pork belly; langoustine (Norway lobster) with grolle mushroom fricassée and parsley emulsion; veal medallion du Périgord with a vol-au-vent of fondant potatoes and brown jus; and warm French toast with aromatic mint ice cream and poached pear in black currant coulis. But before lunch, he will also get to test drive a Maserati Quattroporte (pictured). One will get the heart going, the other will stop it cold with its rich sauces!

The deal is HK\$680 per person, not including the 10 per cent service charge. Of course, the Four Seasons emphasises that dad may not consume alcohol before his test drive and he must have a valid driver's licence. Or you can just lie about being a parent and arrange this macho treat for yourself. Call 3196 8860.



Jockey Club master chefs in the winner's circle with cookbook

It's a little known fact that just as many Jockey Club members go to the Happy Valley clubhouse for the food as the races. Last Thursday, the club finally gave its eateries some of their due by releasing a cookbook featuring more than 60 Chinese and continental recipes from the club's two signature venues, the western Derby Restaurant & Bar and the Cantonese culinary outlet The Fortune Room.

The stars of the tome, called *Food Art*, are its chefs. The recipes all come from either Derby's chef de cuisine, Donovan Cooke (pictured left), or former Jockey Club executive Chinese chef Bobby Lo (right, shown with head of hospitality services Kurt Schwartz), who has since moved to Beijing's Hong Kong Jockey Club clubhouse.

"These two world-class master chefs have helped us realise our desire to publish a cookbook to showcase the club's fine culinary art and total dining



experience," said Schwartz. Actually, Jockey Club members will know the book has been ready since last year when it was available only to members. Now they are finally releasing it to bookstores like Page One so everyone else can check out the tasty dishes and gorgeous pictures by Jorg Sundermann.

In fact, *Food Art* is already a winner. The book won the best innovative cookbook - best cookbook photography prize at the 2007 Gourmand World Cookbook Awards in Singapore.

The ability to be appointed ... is not a political skill. It demands nothing more than dexterity with the shoe brush

the rest of the press conference starred Norman Chan Tak-lam) who said that the new appointees had been hired "on the basis of their political ability after a stringent selection process". And what, one wonders, might "political ability" be when it is at home?

This is a serious question. If we were concerned about our candidates' fitness, we could subject them to physical tests. If we are worried about their intelligence, there are tests for that too. Education? We can examine their diplomas from Oxford, Cambridge and other educational fleshpots. But political ability is a tricky one. Most people would agree that Bill Clinton and Barack Obama have it. On the other hand, it is difficult to dispute the proposition that Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein had it as well. Indeed, if we define it simply as the ability to keep and wield power, then we are dangerously close to seeing its highest examples in that terrible twosome Uncle Joe Stalin and Chairman Mao, who both threw their weight about with great effect and died in the saddle, as it were.

Charity auction will still get its day in the sun

Gallery owner Christine Park's attempt to do her part for the earthquake victims was hit by a natural disaster of its own. The Korean socialite, who operates a classical art and furnishing shop under her own name, had planned an open house and auction on Saturday to raise money for the Sichuan (四川) victims. She had planned to give half the proceeds from the auction to charity, hoping to raise about HK\$10 million. Alas, the black-signal rainstorm spoiled the event. However, with so many guests and luminaries already on hand, Park decided

to go ahead with the gala dinner at her Peak home nevertheless.

Initially, Park wanted to change the auction date to this weekend, but then realised she would be competing with Father's Day. As a result, the auction of works, including 19th century pieces by Henri Guillaume Schlesinger and Carlos Laharrague, will now be the following weekend, with open house viewing on June 21 and 22, and the charity bidding after 3pm on June 22 at House C, Sunshine Villa, 48 Mount Kellett Road, The Peak. For details, call 2849 7771.



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Talkback The E-mail Forum

Should marketing vans be banned from parking on streets?

Your report ("Outrage at telecom 'roving shops'", June 9) neglected to mention the most serious complaint against promotion vehicles, that they operate with their engines running to provide a cool interior for staff while residents and pedestrians have to suffer the stifling air pollution and soaring temperatures they generate.

It is ridiculous that government officials say they cannot take any action against this menace. These vehicles are invariably illegally parked on drop-off areas, yellow boxes or at metered facilities where commercial activities are prohibited.

The fact is that when one makes a complaint to the police the driver is given a verbal warning only, drives around the block and then returns to the same spot. Few residents have the time and energy to hang around and repeat the exercise to ensure that eventually a ticket is issued.

Not only do these vehicles hinder legitimate loading activities on busy streets, they also represent a significant risk to public safety as the drivers are often absent and the windscreen and sides of the vehicles are covered in displays. That possible obstruction to the swift response of our emergency services is tolerated reflects very badly on our administration.

When our chief executive was elected, he promised he would "get the job done". Pollution on our streets and obstruction of traffic flow are matters of major concern to pedestrians and drivers. These promotion vans would disappear in days if he ordered zero tolerance for parking violations. If there are not enough traffic wardens to handle this task, the government should contract out to the private sector.

At the same time, outdated hawking regulations should be urgently revised to reflect the reality that selling services is a commercial transaction no different than selling a T-shirt. The Transport Department should prohibit the modification of vehicles for this purpose.

It is high time that companies like Hutchison and PCCW displayed some corporate social responsibility. They can well afford to open shops and take temporary space in the MTR and



Telecom vans at work in Kweilin Street, Sham Shui Po. Photo: Martin Chan

shopping malls to provide "convenience for their customers".
Mary Melville, Tsim Sha Tsui

What do you think of the government's response to the rainstorm?

I read the report ("Storm victims angry at lack of aid", June 10) and shook my head at what has long been a problem with the government: its stupid bureaucracy.

A Nam Chung resident, Chan Man, reportedly said he "had asked for help from the government but a Highways Department representative told him the path in front of his house was a private one".

A disaster is not the time to look at boundaries and use that as an excuse for not helping. This is one area where the government of Hong Kong is sadly lacking and we will never be the world city it proclaims as long as this attitude prevails.
Rennie Marques, Lai Chi Kok

Should the fuel tax be cut and subsidies offered?

Over the past few years, fuel prices have risen and people have suffered as a result.

Actually, there are several reasons for the ever-increasing price of fuel, two of them being inflation and the energy crisis. Since the Hong Kong economy started on its road to recovery, the rate of inflation has been steadily rising. Consequently, we have less purchasing power and we have to pay more for goods and services.

Some items have escaped this price

These promotion vans would disappear in days with zero tolerance for parking violations

Mary Melville, Tsim Sha Tsui

rise, but not energy. For the same amount of money you will get far less fuel than you could in the past.

But apart from inflation, the energy crisis is also a factor and has led to rising prices. The energy we traditionally use is limited and will eventually run out.

When there is a fuel shortage, prices go up. Consumers compete with each other for limited resources and there is a vicious circle. Prices keep going up until they reach saturation point.

If this problem is allowed to get out of hand, more people will be trapped in poverty.

I believe the government should take action to relieve the external pressure, for instance, it could cut the fuel tax and offer a per-unit fuel subsidy to everyone. I think these measures could help improve the situation.
Kelvin Ngan Wing-kong, Sha Tin

On other matters ...

If any of your readers happen to live in multi-storey buildings, as I do, they will probably have noticed many illegal structures on podiums, verandas and rooftops. I believe such structures pose a safety risk.

Living in Kwun Tong, I have spotted illegal structures in buildings on Hip Wo, Yuet Wah and Mut Wah streets, to name only a few. I remember that some time ago a top official had promised to remove such illegal structures within a certain period to ensure public safety. Strangely, little or nothing has been done as many selfish landlords appear to flout the law without regard to the safety of co-occupiers.

At a time when the Urban Renewal

Authority is removing old buildings in Kwun Tong for redevelopment, it is high time that something was done to rectify the situation.
Peter Wei, Kwun Tong

I refer to the report ("Joy as Tai Po cleanup gets under way", June 6) regarding a clear-up of rubbish illegally dumped.

This was a moment for celebration for the property owners who were affected and is good news for the Hong Kong environment. It sends a clear message to contractors that property owners, the district council, government departments and the media will not tolerate such illegal actions and will pursue the matter until it is rectified.

I am glad that the media, including the *South China Morning Post*, pursued this case. It helped to raise the awareness of the public who called for justice and demanded that the government take action. What has happened proved that such illegal dumping can be stopped and those responsible can be called to account.

The Environmental Protection Department worked very hard with the Planning, Lands and Home Affairs departments and Tai Po District Council to show that such cases are not beyond the control of our legal system.

What happened was a lesson for us all and pointed the way for future action and what people can do if they are faced with the dilemma of illegal dumping.

The 85-year-old villager featured in your report asked me to convey her message: "Thank you for helping us villagers who seemed so helpless and faced closed ears and closed doors."
Yau Wing-kuang, Tai Po district councillor, chairman, Tai Po Environmental Association

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NOTICE ON APPLICATION FOR A LIQUOR LICENCE

Deliciousland Restaurant

Notice is hereby given that Chan Siu Kin of Flat 1E, 8 Ping Shing Lane, Kwun Tong, Kin is applying to the Liquor Licensing Board for new issue of a Liquor Licence in respect of Deliciousland Restaurant at G/F, 426-430 Lockhart Road, Wan Chai, Hong Kong. Any person who knows any reason why this application should not be granted should send a written and signed statement of the facts to the Secretary, Liquor Licensing Board, Lockhart Road Municipal Services Building, 8/F, 225 Hennessy Road, Wan Chai, Hong Kong within 14 days from the date of this notice.

Date : 11th June, 2008

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Tomorrow's Talkback questions

What do you think of the government response to the storm?

Should the fuel tax be cut and subsidies offered?

Send your e-mails to talkback@scmp.com. Please include your full name, address and telephone number, not necessarily for publication.

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