

Ten projects for the people

Many lessons have been taken away from the chaos and conflict surrounding the funding debate for our West Kowloon High Speed Rail link to Shibi and – ultimately – Beijing. They range from the realization that our youth are deeply unhappy, to fresh questions on the value of being plugged into China’s high speed rail network.

I want to ponder on a couple of other lessons. First, that many Hong Kong people think that mega-projects like the high speed rail have more to do with pleasing big companies and the tycoons that lead them than with best-serving Hong Kong’s needs. Second the realization that if the Government is willing to pay HK\$69 billion on a project of disputed public value, then it has gravely undermined its ability to say no to appeals to spend smaller sums on initiatives that are widely felt to be of high public value.

In short, there is a public view that Donald Tsang’s Ten Mega-Infrastructure Projects have more to do with pleasing our business aristocracy than with narrowing our rich-poor divide, or equipping our community to rally strongly out of the current global economic recession. As our Chief Executive begins to ponder the shape of his 2010 Policy Address, he perhaps needs to take a different approach. Not Ten Mega Projects, but Ten Projects for the People.

There seems to me great sense in such a “Ten Projects” approach, though I suspect it would almost certainly contradict the need for a clearer overall political vision. At the heart of the “youth protest” against the West Kowloon high speed rail is not just a distressing sense of alienation and anxiety among Hong Kong’s young, but a deep sense that the Government is out of touch. What better way of attacking these beliefs than by dedicating the Policy Address to the

social challenges that are at the heart of current social disharmony, and prescribing some remedies?

I recommend Ten Projects for the People with extreme trepidation because I know someone is bound to say “OK, smart Alec – so what is your list?” And they would be right. No good preaching without offering some answers at the same time. But how can a small fry like me get such a list right? In truth, I am not going even to try to draw up a definitive list. Instead, I think I can reasonably offer an illustrative list – a list that might spur some public debate, some smart ideas from the people themselves, and some food for thought for Donald Tsang as he ponders his Policy Address.

But first, some principles:

- no “bail-outs” – especially for specific vested interests;
- try to stay true to the principles of “business leads, government facilitates” or whatever the current cliché is;
- encourage self-reliance rather than a sense of dependency;
- don’t waste resources on things that are already being done well;
- these are “big ticket” items. With the West Kowloon benchmark set at HK\$67bn, and the Government’s coffers bulging to the tune of more than HK\$1,000 billion, this is about making a difference, not spreading some palliatives around;
- and perhaps most of all, try to conceive of some kind of visionary intent that can give the projects some coherence of purpose.

I remember working some years ago with Sarah Liao’s Environment and Transport Bureau, trying to help a sprawling bureau find a sense of common purpose. My own conclusion, after several months of heavy-duty interviewing, was that the best single thing Sarah’s staff could do was put a sticker in large

print at the top of each computer saying “My mission is to bring Quality to Life”. In English, this had what I regarded to be a lovely “*double entendre*” - bringing the concept of “quality” to life, and bringing quality to the lives of Hong Kong citizens. Even now, I believe if every civil servant arrived every day at their desk committed to bringing quality to the lives of citizens in their care, they would not go far wrong. Anyway, the recommendation was ignored – maybe we just could not find so neat a double meaning in Cantonese. But for the purpose of my list of Ten Projects for the People, I reckon it could serve us well.

My own Ten Projects for the People would fall into five policy areas – Education, Health Care, the Environment, Property, and Old Age. I know some will complain about omissions. What about the Arts, for example. Sorry, this is MY Ten Projects, not yours. Here goes:

1. Massively strengthen **language tuition** in schools, and offer serious funding incentives for those in work to reach fluency in our three key languages. That would include funding a new institution to train local teachers to teach English as a foreign language.
2. Significant funds set aside for **training**, so that as we emerge from recession, local companies big and small can equip our workforce as fast as possible with the skills they need to drive our competitive future.
3. A massive “**gap year**” **programme** for school- and university-leavers to spend a year working on carefully vetted projects outside Hong Kong. There can be no better way of ensuring our graduates enter our workforce with maturity and sophisticated international awareness.
4. Invest the necessary billions to build a large network of **community clinics** across Hong Kong – including more billions to train more family doctors and nurses. This would allow our hospital accident and emergency departments to deal with accidents and emergencies, rather

than medicating flus and dealing with stomach upsets. It would enable our doctors – both western-trained and traditional Chinese – to work with nurses, opticians, podiatrists, physiotherapists and other health care specialists as teams that provide primary care at the heart of our communities.

5. Fund a comprehensive (and compulsory) basic **health care insurance** scheme that exempted no-one, and embraced chronic and catastrophic illnesses like diabetes or cancer. And I am not talking about the HK\$50bn that John Tsang set aside two years ago. This scheme should be established with an initial investment pool more like HK\$200bn.
6. Encourage energy efficiency with a substantial **Electricity Tax** that starts above a certain specific consumption level and becomes more punitive the more electricity you consume. Families living in 400 square feet in Tin Shui Wai would pay no more than they do today. A family in Kennedy Road with three bedrooms and six air conditioners would quickly get efficient.
7. Invest afresh in a programme of providing **affordable home ownership**.
8. Commit to a long term programme to co-fund incorporated owners' associations and owners of small, **old and dilapidated buildings** to replace and restore Hong Kong's ageing stock of buildings. The Ma Tau Wai Road tragedy provided clear warning of a crisis that may erupt sooner and faster than we think. With some 20,000 buildings now approaching fragile old age, the challenge of restoring or replacing them will be huge. And while we are at it, this programme should embody "best in class" building codes to ensure Hong Kong becomes home to "green homes" in large numbers.
9. A large-scale programme of **sheltered housing for our elderly**. I think our Elderly Commission is already focused on such issues, so maybe I should listen to them.

10. That leaves one project for the Arts after all. Perhaps time should be spent encouraging the development of the **arts as a business** - they are after all set to become a massive employer of young, creative and innovative people.

So there you are Donald. That is my Ten Projects for the People. What would your list be?

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