

Kerry Kennedy

## **Time to acknowledge a Multicultural Hong Kong**

Leung Chun-ying's second Policy Address nailed his government's socially progressive credentials to the mast. Apart from middle class cries of "me too", and the usual opposition from those who will never give any credit to this government, support for the city's poor has been well received. One area in particular is educational support for Hong Kong's ethnic minorities. Long overdue, such support for new school curriculum has the potential to prepare these students for a better life with greater potential to contribute to the good of Hong Kong.

Yet, just as it seemed one aspect of Hong Kong's multicultural landscape was being addressed another less positive element emerged. This was the very public exposure of alleged abuse against foreign domestic helpers that led one international news outlet to refer to Hong Kong's 'slave maids'. Television and print media have been relentless in their pursuit of the issue and the Secretary for Labour is contemplating induction courses for newly arrived domestic helps to acquaint them with their rights. Yet this is not the only blot on Hong Kong's multicultural copy book.

In July last year the Court of Final Appeal made it clear to the government that a unified screening mechanism was necessary to deal with the city's refugees and asylum seekers. Even now the government still relies on the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to make judgment about who was and who was not a refugee. Lack of resources on the part of UNCHR often meant claimants waiting for up to five and sometimes ten years for a decision to be made. In the meantime, refugee claimants could not work and their children could not go to school. The government provides a small stipend for refugees but stories of refugee life in Hong Kong make it clear that such people from different parts of the world are neither welcomed nor greatly assisted. Refugees and asylum seekers are treated as part of the disposable society.

Yet it is not only the explicit racial discrimination evident in attitudes to domestic helpers and refugees that forms part of the city's fabric. The social discrimination experienced by Mainland visitors is a matter of daily comment in the media. Terms like 'locust' have been used to describe Mainlanders resulting at one time in a full page advertisement complaining about the impact of tourists from across the border. This situation has not been helped by the issue of Mainland births in the city's hospitals and the need to place restrictions on the amount of bay formula that can be taken out of the city. Social discrimination is alive and well in Hong Kong.

So the glimmer of hope offered for the city's ethnic minorities is overshadowed by other less savoury aspects of life in the city. Acknowledging Hong Kong's multi-ethnic, multicultural

social context seems an important priority not only for the government but for society as a whole. Calls for a harmonious society fall on deaf ears when blatant racial and social discrimination are part of the agenda of even a minority. Steps must be taken to eliminate all forms of discrimination from the city – democracy and discrimination cannot co-exist.

The government can take the lead which would be perfectly consistent with its socially progressive agenda. A multicultural policy should be developed that sets out the city's values of tolerance, respect, equality and fairness for all of the city's residents – much as is done in the Hong Kong Bill of Rights. These values need to be enshrined in policy that makes it clear to the world where Hong Kong stands on these important issues and it needs to be followed up with public education programmes. The Social Welfare Bureau and the Equal Opportunities Commission are ideal platforms for this public education work. Schools are essential places where this work should begin. Families are the places where the message needs to be heard and practiced.

Multiculturalism, of course, comes with baggage especially whether its purpose is to create a more cohesive society or whether it results in a more fragmented society. Yet we only need to look at the teachings of Buddha, Confucius or Jesus to see how human beings have been urged to live together in peace and harmony rather than in conflict – it is not a question of politics but morality. Hong Kong can create the kind of society where the values of these teachers are lived out. This will involve a commitment to a vibrant multiculturalism that respects people from all cultures, values their contribution and encourages them to be more than they ever hoped they could be. This vision needs to be enshrined in a policy that signals in Hong Kong and beyond the city's values as a caring and just society.

Article published in South China Morning Post under the title ***“Respect and tolerance for all must be enshrined in Hong Kong policy: Kerry Kennedy says recent cases of discrimination in Hong Kong make such a step necessary.”*** on 28 January, 2014