

INSIGHT

The challenge ahead

Joseph Cheng says the policy directions laid out by Leung will not gain traction without support from Legco and the public, and that is currently in short supply in our fractious society

Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying's first policy address was a crucial moment for his administration, which didn't have the benefit of a "honeymoon" period as a result of the scandals that have plagued its first six months. Leung certainly hopes that this will convince the community to give him a chance to do a good job.

His most significant asset is that the government has ample financial resources to implement policy reforms. If Hong Kong people support the proposals, as is the case for 15 years of free education, few critics can say that the community cannot afford them.

During his election campaign, Leung's obvious edge over his main rival Henry Tang Ying-yen was his reformist orientation; and, at the current stage of Hong Kong's development, people want to see serious reform to enhance the economy's international competitiveness and improve social services so as to raise their living standards.

Doubts about his integrity remain Leung's major liability. His popularity hit a new low just before the policy address, and his illegal construction scandals have not been settled. A substantial segment of the pro-democracy movement is now asking for him to step down. Yet, with the backing of the Chinese authorities, this is quite conceivable, at least in the coming two years or so, because of Beijing's concern for the special administrative region's political stability, its unwillingness to lose face since the chief executive was appointed by Chinese leaders, and the absence of a "Plan B" for the time being.

In view of the high expectations on the part of the people and the administration itself, it was always going to be difficult for Leung to score high marks for his policy address.

It had to be comprehensive, because people want to see a policy blueprint for the next five, if not 10, years; and it had to deliver a long-term vision as well as effective short-term measures. Given all the circumstances, the administration cannot claim to have carried out adequate consultation; and it can easily be criticised for what has been left unsaid.

On the other hand, the chief executive managed to offer a good analysis of Hong Kong's deep-seated socio-economic problems and satisfactory broad policy directions to tackle these issues. This is an improvement over the complacency and inaction of the Donald Tsang Yam-kuen administration. But such insights do not translate to immediate, visible benefit to



Hong Kong people. Hence the policy address is unlikely to do much to raise Leung's popularity.

Take the example of housing. Leung promised to increase land supply as well as that of public housing and home-ownership flats, and set out the policy measures to achieve them. He was careful to offer some short-term relief measures, which are not new; and is ready to blame his predecessor for existing inadequacies. Yet it is clear that housing supply will not increase significantly in the next two years.

Leung can, however, rely on the likes of the Long Term Housing Strategy Steering Committee, the soon-to-be established Economic Development Commission, and the Commission on Poverty to come

Leung offered satisfactory broad policy directions to tackle our deep-seated problems

up with more proposals in various important policy areas down the road.

In short, he has the advantage of occupying the floor and holding the initiative. The budget will be announced in the coming month, and this time the financial secretary will be able to distribute "sweeteners" as usual.

Since Leung has indicated that he intends to maintain a balanced budget and apparently is not prepared to use the city's fiscal reserves to enhance its economic competitiveness or welfare benefits for the community, the disposable resources at hand for the government and what it can do become much more limited.

The enhanced subsidy offered to replace old, polluting diesel commercial vehicles reveals the style of the Leung administration. There is no consultation, which is necessary if we are to have a comprehensive long-term policy for environmental protection. Moreover, while big businesses may also benefit, small businesses in general feel they have been adversely affected.

Is the community willing to give him a chance to deliver these reforms? In view of the increasing number of confrontations in the Legislative Council, it will be difficult

for the administration to efficiently steer many measures through the council. Arriving at a consensus at the community level won't be easy, either. Basically, the administration has to maintain solidarity within the establishment; and when it encounters challenges, it will be tempted to seek the help of Beijing and the central government's liaison office.

The administration, and in fact the people of Hong Kong, need a favourable political environment to be able to focus on the many policy proposals outlined in the policy address. Yet, there are likely to be many confrontations that divert attention in the coming months, given the administration's recent request to Hong Kong's top court to consider asking the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress to interpret the Basic Law – and the upcoming political reform discussions in anticipation of the 2017 chief executive election and the 2016 and 2020 Legco elections.

Leung may have passed the policy address test, but the really tough challenges are still to come.

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Vile attitudes

Annie Chan says for all the progress Hong Kong women have made, our culture continues to see them as sexual objects and stigmatise rape

The gang rape and subsequent death of the 23-year-old student in New Delhi last month sparked large-scale protests in India and outrage elsewhere. The widespread discrimination and violence against women and girls in India, the world's largest democracy with a growing economy, is appalling.

In Hong Kong, we tend to assume violence against women is not a serious problem, as we often hear officials boasting about the narrowing of the gender gap in employment, pay, and social and political participation. In the first 10 months of last year, 101 cases of rape were recorded by the police. Surveys of the victims of crime, who do not all report the crime, indicate a different picture. A survey of crime and its victims in 2005 by the Census and Statistics Department shows that indecent assault and blackmail were two of the most under-reported crimes (no cases of rape were reported in this survey, which in itself is telling).

A survey by the Association for the Advancement of Feminism in the same year found that 15 per cent of the women respondents had had sexual intercourse against their will and 45 per cent had suffered indecent assault. Only 5 per cent of the 4,000 cases of sexual assault handled by concern group RainLily over the past two years have been reported to the police. In a culture that stigmatises rape victims as "damaged goods" and thinks a woman must have done something to "deserve" being attacked, in the way she dressed or behaved, or was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, it is little wonder that victims hesitate to report the crime.

Rape is unlike other violent crime. In some cultures, its victims suffer the stigma of "sexual contamination", which has serious implications for the woman's future. It is common practice for defending lawyers to call upon the victim's sexual history and relationship with the accused as a means of establishing consent to sexual intercourse. This puts pressure on the victims who seek justice after their ordeal.

The lack of sensitivity towards the victim during trial (for example, in Hong Kong, testifying behind a screen is an arrangement that is subject to the judge's approval) is another reason that reporting rates remain low.

Fantasies about rape are also commonplace, perpetuated as much by mainstream media as by the pornography industry. One example was some viewers' keen anticipation, fuelled by the mass media, of rape scenes featured in a number of television dramas recently aired on TVB. In one episode, viewers complained about how the much-publicised rape scene was too short, failing to live up to expectations.

It is the "normalisation" of women as sexual objects and the regular presentation of women's bodies as being "up for grabs" that underlie such repellent attitudes towards rape. We must condemn cultural attitudes that encourage us to see rape as trivial, as entertainment.

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Uninspired address should disappoint even the chief executive's supporters

Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying survived the bid at the Legislative Council last week to impeach him, but the attempt was a historic first. The 27 pan-democratic lawmakers who supported the bid will be fondly remembered for trying to make a difference.

Of course, we did not have an option to impeach the governors under British colonial rule.

After the handover in 1997, even though the people of Hong Kong were quite displeased with the performance of the previous two chief executives – Tung Chee-hwa and Donald Tsang Yam-kuen – it never occurred to the pan-democratic camp that there was a need to force them out of office. The most they did was to move a motion of no confidence to voice their discontent. They knew impeachment was a last, powerful resort that should not be abused.

With regard to Leung, the pan-democratic lawmakers had no choice but to respond to widespread public outrage. The pro-government lawmakers who voted against the impeachment showed blatant disregard for public opinion.

Beijing's top representative in Hong Kong, Zhang Xiaoming (張曉明), recently told the media that Leung had the central government's backing. But his explicit backing of Leung was a symbolic gesture more than anything else.

At the Legco meeting over the impeachment motion last week, a number of pro-government lawmakers inadvertently showed their true colours.

James Tien Pei-chun, who vehemently criticised Leung not

Albert Cheng says his housing policies were nothing new, and proposals to alleviate poverty were either non-existent or too vague



long ago, was absent during voting.

Lam Tai-fai, who had voted for an earlier motion of no confidence against Leung (which failed to pass), this time voted against the impeachment motion.

Paul Tse Wai-chun was even more ridiculous. He, too, had voted for the motion of no-confidence against Leung, but said that, by resorting to

Those who did not support the impeachment motion should be kicking themselves now

impeachment, we must be sure that Leung was guilty of dereliction of duty.

He even defended Leung by saying that, although there were illegal building structures at his home, it was a matter that happened before he became the chief executive.

What kind of logic is that? It is a matter of integrity. If Leung did something illegal before he took office, that still goes to show he is not a person to be trusted and certainly could not be a leader for Hong Kong. As a lawyer, Tse

should have been able to differentiate between right and wrong. Some of the other lawmakers were equally unbearable.

Those who vehemently defended Leung over the illegal structures inadvertently pointed out some interesting facts.

First, Leung is a cautious and meticulous person, so there is no way he did not know about the illegal building works at his home. Second, he is not crafty; rather, the opposite.

His supporters who are so eager to give him a chance to implement his policies and prove himself would do well to look to his maiden policy address.

He again manipulated facts and figures, and his policy address was a disappointment.

As a self-proclaimed housing expert, his housing plans are abysmal. He had for a long time attacked his predecessor Donald Tsang for lacking a feasible and comprehensive housing policy.

Tsang built 15,000 public housing units and over 9,000 private ones each year during his five-year term.

Now, Leung is proposing to build 75,000 public housing units and about 4,000 Home Ownership Scheme flats in the next five years.

The estimate for the number of private residential flats coming onto the market may be higher than during Tsang's time, but in substance his housing

policy is no different from that of Tsang.

Leung's proposal to expedite pre-sale approval applications for incomplete flats to meet market demand will benefit property developers rather than buyers and end users.

He also failed to deal with the pressing issue of alleviating poverty, especially for the aged. His specific policy measure to alleviate poverty is through improving the economy.

Then he tried to divide the community by asking young people not to fight government plans to develop housing estates (such as in the northeast New Territories). Otherwise, he warned, the government would not be able to supply enough flats for them in future.

The idea of setting up the Financial Services Development Council, to boost the city's financial co-operation with the mainland, is also a waste of time. The list of ineffective policy proposals goes on.

Those who refused to support the impeachment motion should be kicking themselves now. And others who said he should be given more time to implement his policies should take back their words.

Maybe this is wishful thinking, but his maiden policy address could well be his last.

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Vision in short supply, but Leung delivers on housing

Lau Nai-keung say an attitude of 'making do' won't serve Hong Kong

It seems to me that our chief executive has a hard time understanding the concept of a vision. I think of it as the guiding principle for a society's collective goals and actions. I had high hopes when I heard that Leung Chun-ying would focus more on vision than individual pieces of policy, but the title of his address, "Seek Change, Maintain Stability, Serve the People with Pragmatism", was a blow to my enthusiasm.

Pragmatism is a curious choice of word. It may have a more positive connotation in a Chinese context, but here it suggests conservatism, and our people are not necessarily conservative, especially if they are living below the yet-to-be-established poverty line. The first two phrases – change and stability – seem to cancel each other out, and we are stuck with nothing but pragmatism.

This is what Leung has to say about vision: "Hong Kong people are hardworking, tenacious and earnest. We have an enterprising, dedicated and law-abiding spirit. Our civil service is outstanding, efficient and clean. We have an independent judicial system, and excellent law and order. As well as sophisticated transport systems and telecommunications networks, we are also endowed with close and extensive connections with the mainland and abroad. These are the distinct advantages of Hong Kong."

His vision is also amusingly conditional. "As long as we keep focused on development, avoid

feuds and strive for results, Hong Kong will be able to sustain its economic growth. As long as we have a proactive government and well-planned industrial policies, people from different backgrounds will have the opportunities to realise their potential, and young people will be able to put their learning to good use."

Of course, but that does not resolve our concerns.

Dysfunctional politics is no excuse for failure. What we want to know is how Leung is going to stop the "feuds", especially now that they are so plentiful.

Change and stability seem to cancel each other out, and we are stuck with pragmatism

The kind of vision I had in mind is more along the lines of Hong Kong becoming "a better living and working environment for the people" and to make it a "more liveable city with lush countryside, fresh air and a clean environment". It is vague, but it's still a vision.

Pragmatism is not always a bad word, but it sounds alarmingly like "make do with what we have got".

But, to be fair, Leung did give us something concrete on housing. Knowing that his

legitimacy hinges on his ability to solve our housing problems, or being seen to be solving them, he sensibly devoted a substantial part of his address to the issue.

Previous policies such as the special stamp duty and allowing more eligible applicants to buy Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) flats without paying the land premium have not been able to create a real impact on the housing market as supply shortages persist. There's only so much Leung can do in six months, but his five-year plan is really a game changer.

Leung promises 75,000 new public rental housing flats over the next five years and about 17,000 HOS flats over the four years starting from 2016-17. With the expected supply of 67,000 private flats in the next three to four years, the total number of new flats will be at least 142,000 in the next five years. Compared with the total of 124,000 in the past five years, the increase is an impressive 15 per cent. And there will be even more new flats when HOS construction gets into full swing.

Leung also noted that more than half of the private properties here have a saleable area of less than 50 square metres, and asked if we have the courage to increase this figure. This, my friend, is a vision and I look forward to seeing how the housing market is going to stomach it.

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