

Building Bridges Across The Divide

Evolving our future partnerships and sharing responsibilities

The Hon. Bernard CHAN

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The following are quotations from a number of speeches of the Hon. Bernard CHAN on Business-NGOs partnership and Caring Company

“...Over the years, Hong Kong has seen a major expansion of government involvement in welfare provision. ... And the business sector has had little contact with the NGOs ...”

During economic booms in the past, there was no need for the business and social service sectors to have much contact. Companies paid taxes on time and made some donations during good economic times, acts that were deemed to be fulfilling basic social responsibilities. Most social service organisations had government support and they carried out their tasks by focusing on the provision of good services. However, those good old days are gone. With public finances in deficit, it is obvious that we can't expect the government to do everything. So spending is now being trimmed, and that includes the social welfare budget.

***“..... there is a big gap in understanding.
And in the long run, I think this could mean trouble....”***

A lot of members of the business community support these welfare cuts. They think our welfare system is too generous. They worry that it is subsidizing the wrong people, or taking away people's incentives to work. Conversely, some people from the NGOs think profit driven businesses are the cause of social problems. They see companies seeking profit - cutting jobs, outsourcing, moving offshore - and never caring about the social impact of what they do. Hong Kong is already an unequal society. If the community becomes more and more split between haves and have-nots, we will all lose. People on both sides of the division will be tempted to support policies that are extreme. This is not in the interests of Hong Kong as a place for business or a place for people.

***“...We all know that there are people who are being left out
and we will all suffer in the long run if we don't do something about it....”***

Although the economy is looking better at the moment, we still face many challenges as a community. We all know that there are people who are being left behind and left out. And we will all suffer in the long run if we don't do something about it. We have an aging population. We have more unskilled newcomers arriving from the Mainland. We have more unskilled young people leaving school. And we have various groups in the community that face discrimination in employment and other areas. In many cases, people are marginalized from the rest of the community. And this can lead to bigger problems that inflict costs on all of us.

***“... We encourage the private sector to build
genuine partnerships with NGOs,
and to help in their own small ways to create a more inclusive society...”***

Obviously, there is a need to explore new models of strategic cooperation between business and social welfare sectors to respond to the above complex socio-economic challenges. Each of them possesses unique attributes and strengths, and each enrich in different ways the social, economic, environmental and cultural life of our citizens. They can contribute more to societal well-being by

working in mutually supportive ways than by working in isolation. In 2002, the Hong Kong Council of Social Service launched the Caring Company Scheme. The idea was to encourage the private sector to build genuine partnerships with NGOs, and therefore to help in their own small ways to create a more inclusive and fairer society. This Scheme matches companies of all sizes with welfare organizations. Nearly 500 companies are currently involved. It is not about donating money. It is about sharing resources and ideas with welfare organizations. In many cases, companies' employees go out into the community and get personally involved.

***“... We can't push a button and create instant social unity.
But we can encourage people from each sector to get in contact with each other
across dividing lines, and start working together....”***

The spirit of the “Caring Company” is to build lots of small bridges between different parts of our divided society. It's not just about getting businessmen to think about the problems of the disadvantaged. It's also about getting the disadvantaged, and the welfare providers who serve them, to think about how businesses work. It's not just about donations going from the haves to the have-nots. It's also about people in the corporate sector gaining a new role in the community - new experience, and new insight. We are trying to get out of the habit of thinking simply in terms of handing over cash. We want companies and NGOs to get closer to each other. To understand each other better - and to understand each other's culture.

***“... Business – NGOs partnership is a movement
to build a less-divided and more united society.”***

It's important that we in Hong Kong develop this movement. We need a less-divided, more united society. In the long run, we can't have prosperity where the business community, the middle class and the grassroots simply want to take from each other. We can't have a stable society where the people on the fringes, with no voice, are simply ignored and left behind. If we are going to have a more democratic system in the future, we need a society where people ask what is in the interests of “us” rather than “me”. We need an environment where people want what's best for the community, rather than simply for their industry or their social class. To get there, we need to build bridges across the divide. We need individuals from different parts of society to make contact, to help each other and to learn from each other.

***“....The government should not only trust the potential strength of
the civil society, but also actively encourage and promote a stronger civil society....”***

The remaining question is: “What is the role of Government in building the future partnership?” Voluntary cooperation among Government, Business and the Third Sector requires a shared understanding of socio-economic opportunities and challenges. Collaboration is built through non-confrontational, effective dialogue. The role of the Government is to provide more space for Tripartite Partnership to flourish. The government should not only trust the potential strength of the civil society, but also actively encourage and promote a stronger civil society. The Government may promote the value of the civil society both within and outside government; create the necessary policy framework for the civil society to better participate, and use financial instruments to strengthen the capacity of the Third Sector.