

# LETTER TO HONG KONG

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This may sound unlikely, but I have really *cared* about Hong Kong ever since I was a very small boy. How could that be? Well, because my uncle, an Australian air force pilot, was hired just after the War by a little venture calling itself, rather grandly, Cathay Pacific Airlines, to fly its very first aircraft - the DC3 that was to become famous around the region as "Betsy" - on its very first commercial passenger services out of Hong Kong. And for some years thereafter he wrote to me, his first-born nephew - in a simple, striking way I can still recall nearly half a century later - about the sights and sounds and tastes and smells, and vibrancy and bustle and energy, of the Hong Kong that he had come to love.

By the time I first flew into Hong Kong myself, in the mid 1960s, it was as if I had been making for years that heart-stopping, swooping, banking descent in over the rooftops of Kowloon, or walking for years the backstreets of Wanchai or eating for years at that Szechuan restaurant down the end of Lockhart Road. Everything was *where* I expected it to be, *how* I expected it to be and as stimulating to all the senses as I had *known* it would be. In fact I think I could find my way more easily around the city in that first thirty years ago than I can *now*, coming back every year or so to find each time the landscape dramatically changed by reclamation and rebuilding!

My experience of Hong Kong, my knowledge of Hong Kong, and my affection for Hong Kong, is not unique or even very unusual among Australians. Quite apart from all of us who have visited Hong Kong over the years (it seems sometimes that must be just about everyone in the country by now!), some 30,000 Australians now live and work here, and nearly 1500 Australian businesses have a presence on the ground. There are, moreover, some 100,000 Hong Kong citizens who now live permanently (or are entitled to do so) in Australia, and another 120,000 or so who come to Australia each year as students or tourists or business visitors. We do know each other very well, and we have each benefited greatly from our relationship in economic and human terms. We in Australia *do* care deeply about Hong Kong's future.

Of course we have been as well aware as you for a long time now that Hong Kong's future would be very different from that of all the other British possessions around the globe (Australia included) who have, one by one, grown and matured to independent statehood. While a lot of people may have wished it otherwise, that was never going to happen. The reversion of Hong Kong to China's possession on the last stroke of midnight on 30 June 1997 was a date with history that was always going to have to be met.

But what has *not* been so fixed or certain is how that transition would be managed. When the

music stopped and the chairs were changed, how much of Hong Kong's unique identity and character could and would be maintained? On these issues we have all been anxiously holding our breath - and we haven't yet had cause to relax and breathe out.

There was a very big responsibility on those governing Hong Kong through all its years as a British colony to prepare for the transition in a way that would enable the people of Hong Kong, and those who live and work in Hong Kong, and are committed to Hong Kong, to face their future with the minimum possible disruption and the maximum possible continuity: to face their future with the maximum possible chance of maintaining Hong Kong's status as one of the great commercial centres not only of East Asia but of the world; the maximum possible chance of maintaining a lifestyle which is free and unrestrained; and the maximum possible chance of maintaining a system of government which responds to the needs and wants of its people.

We can argue now, and no doubt we will for a long time yet, whether in years gone by the British Government discharged that responsibility as well as it possibly could. I for one think, frankly, that the moves to democratise the institutions of government, and to codify fundamental and political and civil rights, came far too late - making it far too easy for the cynics in Beijing and elsewhere to have their day. At the same time I have in recent years, when I was Australia's Foreign Minister and personally since, repeatedly expressed my strong support for what Governor Patten and those working with him were trying to achieve, and did achieve, in this respect.

However little, and however late, more democracy is always worth having. Everyone, as a matter of basic, fundamental, universal human rights, should be able to participate in determining how and by whom they are governed. Everyone, as a matter of basic, fundamental, universal, human rights - wherever they live, and under whatever system of government - should be able to talk openly and write openly, be it with friends or family or through the news media, about what they think is wrong about the way in which they are governed.

It is not a matter of Western values versus Asian values. Whether one is talking about political and civil rights, or economic and social rights like access to decent housing, health care, education and standards of living, the need for respect for the dignity of the individual in *all* these respects is as much a part of Confucian and other major Asian philosophical traditions as it is of every major ethical system elsewhere in the world. As Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, pointed out in a speech in Hong Kong not so long ago: "It is altogether shameful, if ingenious, to cite Asian values as an excuse for autocratic practices and denial of basic rights and civil liberties". ['Media and Society in Asia', Asian Press Form, 2 December 1994]

One would have to be an even more congenial optimist than I am to hope that, for the time being, these views will command much acceptance in Beijing. But all that is necessary is that Beijing honour its promise that after 1997 Hong Kong be governed on the principle of 'one country, two systems' - and that the system of democracy, partial and incomplete though it may be, that has evolved so far be allowed to continue; that the protection of rights and liberties which have evolved so far remain in place; and that the fine traditions in Hong Kong of an

independent and fearless judiciary; of a clean and efficient civil service; and of the untrammelled operation of the rule of law - remain untrammelled in even the slightest degree.

It is not only in the interests of the people of Hong Kong that all this happen. It is overwhelmingly in China's own interests. Hong Kong, as it has operated so far - with a credible legislature, a strong and respected judiciary and civil service, a free press working against corruption, and a strong attachment to the rule of law - has become the world's eighth largest trading entity, and (despite its minuscule population by comparison) has grown to be about one-fifth of the size of the whole Chinese economy.

Australia, and all those other countries that now do so much business in and through Hong Kong, would look very differently, and with much less confidence, on Hong Kong were these conditions to change. And the model that China undoubtedly wants Hong Kong to be for handling the situation in Taiwan will be much less compelling for Taiwan if 'one country, two systems' proves to be illusory in its first major application here.

China will, of course, make its own decisions about what is in its own national interests. China is now, as it has been in centuries past, a great power, with a perfectly understandable consciousness of its role and status in the contemporary world. But as President Clinton recently said in Australia, what matters in the years ahead is "how the Chinese *define* their greatness". I very much hope for the sake of the people of Hong Kong, and all of us in Australia and elsewhere, who are presently holding our breath, that in relation to Hong Kong, China defines its greatness with grace, moderation, intelligence, and a greatness of spirit. History will have much for which to thank Beijing if it does.

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