

Briefing Paper (four pages)

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CC. For Mr. David Lan, Secretary for Home Affairs

Preamble

The Constitutional Affairs Bureau in July concluded a consultative study into district administration reform. The proposed overhaul poses challenges and opportunities for the arts community.

The government seems determined to abolish or replace the Regional and Urban Councils with the District Boards. Were either to happen-and the news could be known as early as the Policy Address next month-it would create a conundrum in three areas of responsibility presently borne by the two Councils.

The first is hygiene, for which the government may resume full responsibility. The second is management of sports facilities, which could well be subject to private sector open tender. The third is the overseeing of arts programs at Council halls. At present the Regional and Urban Councils manage public sports and arts venues and organize some events. All told this is a \$2 billion a year enterprise.

Past and Present

The ambivalence-a mix of apprehension and anticipation-about the future has also stirred up chronic misgivings about the arts scene. Back in 1961, with the building of the City Hall, the Urban Council made its first concerted

attempt to take charge of arts. Subsequently the Hong Kong Arts Center (founded in 1977) and the Academy for the Performing Arts (founded in 1984) were born and given considerable autonomy. Today the two Municipal Councils, the District Boards, the Academy for Performing Arts, the Arts Center and the Arts Development Council all have some say on culture. These voices make not for a dulcet chorus but rather a cacophony.

The colonial government in 1995 established the statutory Arts Development Council and inaugurated a five-year plan, affecting the cultural direction of Hong Kong into the 21st Century. The strategy now seems somewhat intrusive and presumptuous since it was conceived in the waning years of colonial rule and should not be the final, definitive say on the cultural development of the territory as a Special Administrative Region. This insistence on mapping out the future for the arts has since raised doubts-and hackles-about British motive. History is rich with examples of governments using sports, arts and education to mold the identity of their subjects and influence people.

The ADC, as the acme of arts policy and authority on funding decisions, seems to be a contradiction, according to the its critics. The body's board comprises a balance (some say a deadlock) in elected and appointed members. Not only are the two lots contend with each other on outlook, the elected individuals, each accountable to his or her constituency, often differ among themselves. The "fief mind set" is so persistent that consensus is hard to achieve or to maintain with each seeing the gains of one as the losses for all the others. These fractious, sometimes acrimonious, relations and, among the different disciplines, rivalries are a discordant note. This is the opinion of those who protest the "fragmentation" of the arts community.

One of the frequently aired complaints against the ADC is that it is too occupied with niggling arguments over grants at the expense of a broader and more constructive arts agenda. Some members say they spend up to 200 hours a month on Council business, often haggling over dollars and cents of a single grant.

What the future holds and bodes

The undoing of the Regional and Urban Councils is a crisis for the arts scene. But crisis poses both risks and opportunities. Some leaders in the arts believe the opportunities far exceed the risks and reckon this is their chance

to reform the ADC and define an arts policy. They also want a balance of largesse for “foreign” and “vernacular” arts. More and more advocate promoting artistic forms that are rooted in the Chinese heritage, which incidentally is what outsiders often find intriguing about Hong Kong.

The government, these reformers assert, should seek legislative approval for a full statutory body covering the arts and strive for a wide public debate, consultation if need be, of the issue. They recommend a Cultural Authority, of which the ADC is an adjunct or which absorbs the ADC’s current functions. They also suggest the hiving off or privatization of venues presently operated by the Regional and Urban Councils, the same for ticketing. This would quell excessive politicking, of which, they claim, the Regional and Urban Councils are rife.

They also favor open bidding with the contracts accorded to the local management firms with proven track records. They say the costs saved from the paying of civil service types of wages and fringe benefits would then be passed to the artists who accept that funding is likely to stagnate because of the recession.

The ADC, they propose, should evolve into or adopt a vetting panel similar to the University Grants Committee, which gauges academic research applications on their scholastic merit. This should save time and cease much of the wrangling now dogging the ADC. The future Cultural Authority should appoint members to a new, nonpartisan Arts Grants Committee. There should also be an appeals procedure whose verdict is final.

The Cultural Authority should be modeled on the Housing Authority and it must be accountable to the public through the scrutiny of the Legislative Council, they insist. Those chosen for the Authority should have a background in or involvement with the arts, though they need not be artistes per se. Members may include academics and educators since one of the Special Administrative Region policy priorities must be the imbuing of the next generation with creativity and artistic sensitivity.

Conclusion

One of the knocks against the Municipal Council management of sports and arts is that it has been too bureaucratic. The sentiment is that it would be a mistake for the government to take over the management since such a move

would result in another set of bureaucracy. The ideal solution is to let artistes have a direct say in a future Culture Authority tempered by input from the government, experts, academics and representatives of the public. The end object is to have an arts scene that is relevant, dynamic, imaginative, flexible, accessible and can live within the means, which is never sufficient. Arts, to survive, then thrive, are not an artifice. They spring from the individual and collective experiences. Minimal bureaucracy, maximum freedom within austere financial bounds, room for both the esoteric and the popular as well as public support are the essential elements for the arts.

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