

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post, Monday, March 13, 2017.

## Think again, Beijing: Carrie Lam is the wrong person to lead Hong Kong out of the political storm

Tom Plate believes the central government should back John Tsang, the leader the people want, rather than the mediocre and unpopular Carrie Lam to be the SAR's next chief executive



Does the Chinese Communist Party possess the political wisdom and emotional range to handle the many difficult challenges that catch the world's eye?

Since the 1997 handover, the special administrative region of Hong Kong has been in the limelight. On the whole, its new life under Beijing's absolute sovereignty has not gone badly: People's Liberation Army troops are not befouling the streets, as much of the Western media once all but predicted; the economy sails along, and this dandy gem remains one of the world's most iconic metropolises ... up-and-coming Shanghai notwithstanding.

An election is coming at the end of this month that could put all this at serious risk. Indications are that the winner, and thus Hong Kong's next leader, will be [Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor](#), the former chief secretary, because the Xi Jinping (习近平) government prefers her, and because Beijing pulls enough weight within the city's Election Committee – the elite group of electors that chooses the chief executive – to get what it wants.

### [Beijing's heavy lobbying for Carrie Lam as Hong Kong leader could backfire, academic warns](#)

What evidently it doesn't want is former financial secretary [John Tsang Chun-wah](#), or anyone capable of even semi-independent leadership. Like the former British colonial government, the Chinese like their Hong Kong leader tame and lame.

Yet, this capable and likeable civil servant is running [strongest in the public opinion polls](#) (by as much as 14 percentage points by one estimate). But Tsang will not be the next chief. This anomaly arises because Hong Kong's "election" method is not the basic one-person, one-vote deal; it's "democracy" of a filtered sort.

### [How should Hong Kong 'drain the swamp'?](#)



Hong Kong is not alone, by the way, in using a bizarre intermediary system that dilutes voters' sentiment. Mathematically simple, one-person, one-vote systems are not everyone's cup of tea.

Even the United States selects its No 1 via a patchwork quilt of 538 electors collected from its 50 states. Sadly enough, this crazy system has the talent to select as the winner a candidate who failed to win a majority of the overall votes. In 2000, George W. Bush was second to Al Gore [by 543,895 votes](#). In 2016, Donald Trump was second to Hillary Clinton by [2,868,691 votes](#). Now the world, you see, will just have to learn to live with this "loser".

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Is the Hong Kong system for selecting its leader so categorically different? By the end of the month, the 1,194-member Election Committee is to produce, by majority decision, the next chief. Mathematically, that is close to one elector per 6,000 people; by comparison, the US has one elector for every 600,000 people. Choose the system you like better.

Ten years ago, in Singapore, the late Lee Kuan Yew was wondering about Hillary Clinton, who at that time looked a slam dunk to become US president someday. How good was she? I shot a glance at the university colleague with me in Lee's office at the Istana, the government palace, and we agreed: she's good enough. Lee mulled that over: "Good enough? Well, good ... Because anyone you elect president, we in Asia have to live with."

Similarly, anyone selected by Hong Kong as its next leader, the rest of us will have to live with. This means that if the leader is popular and can govern well and keep relations with Beijing steady, we are all winners. Then, Hong Kong stays the shining jewel and avoids turning into ... a Taiwan in diapers.

But if the next leader is problematic – whether incompetent or in other ways – then it becomes an international problem and we are all losers, especially [relations between China and the US](#), as American public opinion of China will very probably sour.

#### [Lack of popular mandate would make it hard to govern Hong Kong, Carrie Lam admits](#)

Let's look at Beijing's record in pulling the strings. The about-to-leave [Leung Chun-ying](#), widely disliked, is publicly unimpressive but is almost a paradigm of the ideal for Beijing: an administrator who takes orders. His predecessor, [Donald Tsang Yam-kuen](#), was a distinctly capable technocrat but, due to the recent conviction for malfeasance in office, finds himself in a jail cell in Stanley Prison, praying that his lawyers can come up with a miracle. The first post-handover chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, was booted out by public pressure in 2005. While he remains civically active and in Beijing carries on as vice-chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, he was also far more of an administrator than a leader.

It's a near certainty that none of Hong Kong's first three chief executives will be crowned by history as great Chinese leaders, in the company of Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基), Zhou Enlai (周恩來) and others.

#### [Has Beijing changed its mind about giving Hong Kong people the vote?](#)



Accordingly, Carrie Lam would seem to fit nicely into this unthreatening tradition of mediocrity – as John Tsang very well might not. “Don’t rock the boat” is the course Beijing wants. But probably what it will get instead is the opposite: endlessly turbulent political waters that will sink a hapless Lam, as they have Leung and Tung.

Since taking over in 2012, the Xi government has made a number of commendable decisions. This is not one of them. Is it too late to switch Beijing’s fateful finger of favouritism to Tsang? For, in pushing Lam over Tsang, Beijing is playing a losing game. You’d hate to see Beijing make a major blunder in its custody of Hong Kong. But such appears to be looming. Please think this one through again, Beijing.

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