

...As always, everything came back to the political structure. And, as always, the emphasis was on delaying constitutional reform. The Commission on Strategic Development had been expected to issue a report outlining some sort of consensus on political reform in early 2007, but, hardly surprisingly, the group of businessmen, pro-democrats and others had failed to find agreement. Much of the argument had been about the functional constituencies, which those business sectors privileged enough to benefit from them were determined to keep. One suggestion had been to convert the small electorates of these constituencies into nomination committees, which would put forward several candidates, which could then be returned by universal suffrage. It was an imaginative idea that would partly address both sides' concerns, but it also illustrated the futility of attempts to find consensus between the two camps; pro-democrats rejected it on the grounds that it could entrench functional representation in the system, while to many Liberal Party members it went too far in taking control of 'their' seats away from them. (The administrative headache of giving every voter 30 extra votes was another matter.) A similar idea was mooted for election of the chief executive: a nomination committee (required by the Basic Law) would put candidates forward, and the whole electorate could choose from them. Again, opinion was divided on the details. Pro-democrats wanted a democratically elected Legco to form the committee, while conservatives wanted the existing Election Committee to do the job. Actually airing the basic principle of screening candidates to ensure acceptability to Beijing was a sort of progress. A system that barred people Beijing didn't trust from running was obviously not democratic; it would also risk undermining the credibility of the winner if opinion polls showed that a barred person was more popular. But at least it would have an element of universal suffrage in it, and the winner could claim a popular mandate of sorts. Discussion of the principle suggested that Donald Tsang – and presumably at least someone in Beijing – accepted that an open vote, if not open candidacy, could not be avoided at some stage. Realistically, it was as much as the communist regime would ever tolerate. Officials promised to issue a green paper containing three proposals before the end of the year.

In early March, Anson Chan and a 'core group' of six independent moderates produced a carefully thought-out proposal to have universal suffrage in 2012. Everyone would be allowed to vote for chief executive candidates nominated by a more representative body than the Election Committee, while in Legco, functional constituencies would be consolidated and phased out by 2016. Both pro-democracy and pro-Beijing camps dismissed the package out of hand. The government also saw fit to hurriedly pour cold water on the elements of the proposal that required changes to the 2008 election methods, which Donald Tsang had ruled out in a fit of pique after pro-democrats vetoed his 2005 reform bill...