

...Only 23% of the Hong Kong population at this time supported a second term of office for Tung. That figure had been declining steadily since the handover, and there was no shortage of other statistics showing that Tung was becoming more and more unpopular, and his government less and less credible.

One of the main producers of this damning evidence was Hong Kong University's Public Opinion Programme, run by Dr. Robert Chung Ting-yiu. In July 2000, he claimed that Tung had indirectly put pressure on him to stop his polling work – a claim that instantly set off alarm bells about academic freedom. The university set up an open committee of inquiry manned by respected and independent legal minds, which more or less got to the bottom of the controversy, though Tung himself refused to give evidence. Andrew Lo Cheung-on, a trusted aide whom Tung had brought with him from his shipping company, had been to see the vice-chancellor of the university in early 1999 and asked pointed questions about the relationship between the university as an institution and Chung and his programme. He wouldn't have had to point out that the university relied heavily on funding from the government, nor that the chief executive is by tradition the chancellor – or symbolic head – of the university. According to Chung, the vice-chancellor's deputy then urged him to cease his work, doing so again towards the end of the year. It was also reported that Lo had urged several big property developers not to advertise in the pro-democracy *Apple Daily* and had lobbied against the re-appointment of the newspaper group's corporate financial advisor to the council of Chinese University. The Robert Chung affair highlighted two worrying sides of Tung's character. First was the informal and indirect use of a culture of subservience – doing dirty work by passing the word on to someone who meekly passes it on again. This of course avoids direct confrontation and unnecessary loss of face, but it is impossible to reconcile with the accountability and integrity the people of Hong Kong expected in their chief executive. Tung's refusal to fire Lo, who had struck the committee of inquiry as 'not a credible witness', was also typical of a culture in which personal ties and loyalties override the commonly accepted rules. (Tung had also insisted on keeping his chauffeur when he became chief executive, requiring the civil service to infringe its competitive recruitment policy.) The second was Tung's impulse (when studied deafness failed) to shoot the messenger. Even worse, this particular message, or regular and increasingly depressing string of messages, was not that of an opponent; the opinion polls were a mirror of Tung's own performance. The attempt to silence them was the act of an emperor who cannot be wrong. And, of course, it drove his ratings down even further...