

主旨: Population Policy Consultation

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I'd like to express my opinions on population policy and its consultation.

First of all, I appreciate the public engagement exercise which intended to foster participation from the public. However, this year's public forums were not very fruitful in terms of participation rate as a result of two reasons. First, the dates of the forums were not well-informed enough to the public. Actually, I missed all the 3 dates, each of which would have never been announced right after the previous forum and the TV news did not report the dates beforehand. There should be more publicity about the dates and its details in the future. The domination of certain political groups also defeated the purpose of the exercise by preventing meaningful exchange of ideas with the public. Certain political parties politicized certain issues, like population cap and One Way Permit Scheme, using huge signs and shouting meaningless slogans. This would mislead the public by shifting our attention to certain unimportant details. It is of paramount importance for the management of the host party, therefore, to uphold the rules by removing such people from the hall immediately in the future.

While population policy can cover quite a large scope apart from our economy, this has not yet been adequately addressed to the public. One thing we have to understand is: population policy is new to us and its consultation is even newer. Most are not very clear about to what population policy is related and how it can help our society. I understand you have made a lot of effort in making this known. Yet, I have to say this was still not enough to warm up the people who had no ideas of what population policy is all about. This led to a low participation rate from the public (excluding political parties) as noted in the forums. I understand that you made it a lot more focused by making a list of suggestions. But the way you listed the suggestions on the website did not clarify the purpose much—it just made it focused.

In a certain online document, it is stated: "proposed population policy should strive to improve the overall quality of our population to meet our vision of Hong Kong as a knowledge-based economy and world class city." Does population policy solely serve the purpose of our economy? It seems not. For instance, ageing population might call for the need for more hospitals and this has nothing to do with our economy. There might be a lot of aspects which population policy might cover and yet they might not be directly related to our economy. Even though the whole consultation has taken a few months, it still gives me an impression that it was done in haste.

I support your ideas that i) a population cap is undesirable, ii) no case for changing the One Way Permit Scheme and iii) Type II children not being a solution to the demographic challenge.

In relation to the drop in birth rate and thus labour force in the coming decade, I support i) the import of labour to alleviate the short-term shortage for the construction and the catering industries only; and ii) the extension of the retirement age in order to solve this problem.

As far as the import of labour is concerned, most people would agree that the employment of local labour should be secured in the first place. However, this might not be easily done because sometimes employers would intentionally or unintentionally create certain job requirements which leave the job vacancy opened. For example, there was a piece of news about a 40-year-old waitress who pretended to be 27 and forged her Identity Card. I am not approving her act of forgery but the fact is most employers prefer young employees, which might not be a necessary condition in order to perform her job. In other words, this involves

discrimination. I also recalled the experience of posting job advertisements for a friend who was looking for chefs and a trainee. He found it difficult to get someone to fill up the vacancy even though an acquaintance who was around 50 was eager to take up the post. Is age a critical factor in meeting the job requirements? How would the government secure the employment of our local labour before importing manpower? Do we have existing manpower to fill up the vacancies? Or is the employer too selective only? Has the government made an effort to examine why the job vacancy remains opened? Due care should be taken beforehand.

In relation to the extension of the retirement age, something has to be done in order to change the people's mind-set about ageing. Most employers do prefer young work force as in Europe. According to <Older, healthier and working: Britons say no to retirement>, the UK government "opted to abolish compulsory retirement at 65 in 2011, with the retirement age steadily rising since the turn of the century. Employers should be urged to embrace the rising numbers of older workers as an opportunity and combat ageism in the workplace, so they are seen as assets, not liabilities. There is a wealth of ideas and initiatives at play in Europe to encourage people to work longer, and for employers to regard their older employees as an asset. In Sweden, employers who recruit older workers on long-term contracts are entitled to a subsidy of up to 75% of the older worker's salary, while the German government intends to introduce greater flexibility to working time and open up more sabbaticals for its older workforce. Meanwhile, the Dutch government has introduced age discrimination legislation, information campaigns, age-management initiatives and policies to promote part-time and flexible working. Ros Altmann, a pensions expert, believes that retirement should be "a process, not an event". She said: "A period of part-time work and phased retirement would reduce some of the pressure on pensions, which would initially need only to top up a lower level of income, rather than replacing earnings altogether."^[1]

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We have to admit that age discrimination does exist in society. If we would like more senior work force to keep serving in the labour market, we also need to educate the public and enact laws to prevent age discrimination. Similar laws have been passed in many European countries in order to make sure senior citizens would have equal chance of getting employed.

I would also suggest the provision of more and better job matching service. The existing service from the Labour Department deems inadequate in terms of job counseling. Does the labour department try to understand the reasons for the unemployment? For certain people of special needs, there should be more flexibility as to the working conditions in order for them to work.

Last but not the least, I do not support the idea of financing artificial insemination. It is very expensive and might pose a heavy burden on the financial budget. Its effectiveness in pushing up the birth rate remains questionable and it might be easily abused.

Regards,
Yvonne K.

[1]

Meyer, Harriet, the Observer, <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/aug/24/working-britons-retirement>