

The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

I joined the annual walkabout on Wednesday, July 1, and I really enjoyed the exercise. But it was all so confusing, you know. My original political platform was that the Hongkong Government should consider the plight of single parents and subsidise some of their expenses, but, since there were so many people in the walkabout, I had to join the branch that was calling for more democracy in the territory. I was not sure what the term, 'more democracy' meant, but it had a nice ring to it so I joined in. 'Give us liberty!' I heard myself chant. 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité ("Liberty, Equality, Fraternity")', I sang out in my best vocalisation. A solicitor in the same row as I looked quizzically at me and asked the reason that I was chanting in French. I told him that as it was good enough in France in 1789, it was good enough in Hongkong in 2009 – exactly 220 years later. The Chinese solicitor, whose ignorance of history was quite obvious, then, listened to me while I explained The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which was approved by The National Assembly of France on August 26, 1789. Having had a university education in Geneva, Switzerland, I told this officer of the Hongkong High Court that the representatives of the French people, in 1789, organised as a National Assembly, believing that the ignorance, neglect, and/or contempt of the rights of man were the sole causes of public calamities and of the corruption of governments. It was determined that a solemn declaration of the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man be enshrined in a document for all men to see and to read in order that this declaration, being constantly before all the members of the social body, shall remind them, continually, of their rights and duties; in order that the acts of the legislative power, as well as those of the executive power, may be compared, at any moment, with the objects and purposes of all political institutions and may thus be more respected, and, lastly, in order that the grievances of the citizens, based hereafter upon simple and incontestable principles, shall tend to the maintenance of the Constitution and redound to the happiness of all. As I rambled off this little monologue, the Chinese solicitor appeared not to be listening! 'What a waste of my time!' I thought to myself. The Chinese solicitor, eventually, asked whether or not I believed in Universal Suffrage. This question made me angry: 'Haven't you been listening to me?' And, with that, the solicitor moved off where there were some Filipinas, yelling for equal pay with bus drivers or something like that. It was, at this time, that I realised that many of the people in the walkabout had no idea as to the reason for the parade ... or was it a charade?

I turned my attention to a group of Filipinas, all of whom were maids and all of whom were holding placards, reading: 'We are not servants! We are workers!' I asked one young Filipina as to the difference between a servant and a worker. I was informed that a servant was indentured, while a worker engaged in an occupation, voluntarily. I asked this little Filipina whether or not the Chief Executive of Hongkong was a servant or a worker. The answer was that he was a worker because he asked for the job and he had not been forced to work for the people of the territory as in the case of an indentured servant. I was more than a little confused, at this point in the conversation, so I asked: 'Don't you have a contract with your employer?' 'Yes!' came the answer, 'and I want this to change so I can get another job with more pay. Workers have rights, too, you must understand. What are you doing here? You are not a Filipina! Go away from me!' Then, another Filipina, who had been eavesdropping on the conversation added: 'We want equal work for

equal pay ... or is it the other way round?’ It was time for me to move on again because, really, I was getting very, very confused. It reminded me of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland:

‘There was a table set out under a tree in front of the house, and the March Hare and the Hatter were having tea at it: A Dormouse was sitting between them, fast asleep, and the other two were using it as a cushion, resting their elbows on it, and talking over its head. “Very uncomfortable for the Dormouse,” thought Alice; “only as it’s asleep, I suppose it doesn’t mind.”

‘The table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one corner of it. “No room! No room!” they cried out when they saw Alice coming. “There’s plenty of room!” said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table.

“Have some wine,” the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.

‘Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. “I don’t see any wine,” she remarked.

“There isn’t any,” said the March Hare.

“Then it wasn’t very civil of you to offer it,” said Alice angrily.

“It wasn’t very civil of you to sit down without being invited,” said the March Hare.

“I didn’t know it was your table,” said Alice: “It’s laid for a great many more than three.”

“Your hair wants cutting,” said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.

“You should learn not to make personal remarks,” Alice said with some severity: “It’s very rude.”

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he said was “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?”

“Come, we shall have some fun now!” thought Alice. “I’m glad they’ve begun asking riddles — I believe I can guess that,” she added aloud.

“Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?” said the March Hare.

“Exactly so,” said Alice.

“Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.

“I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least — at least I mean what I say — that’s the same thing, you know.”

“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “Why, you might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see’!”

“You might just as well say,” added the March Hare, “that ‘I like what I get’ is the same thing as ‘I get what I like’!”

“You might just as well say,” added the Dormouse, which seemed to be talking in its sleep, “that ‘I breathe when I sleep’ is the same thing as ‘I sleep when I breathe’!”

"It is the same thing with you," said the Hatter, and here the conversation dropped, and the party sat silent for a minute, while Alice thought over all she could remember about ravens and writing-desks, which wasn't much.

The Hatter was the first to break the silence. "What day of the month is it?" he said, turning to Alice: he had taken his watch out of his pocket, and was looking at it uneasily, shaking it every now and then, and holding it to his ear.

Alice considered a little, and then said "The fourth."

"Two days wrong!" sighed the Hatter. "I told you butter wouldn't suit the works!" he added, looking angrily at the March Hare.

"It was the best butter," the March Hare meekly replied.

"Yes, but some crumbs must have got in as well," the Hatter grumbled: "You shouldn't have put it in with the bread-knife."

The March Hare took the watch and looked at it gloomily: Then he dipped it into his cup of tea, and looked at it again: But he could think of nothing better to say than his first remark, "It was the best butter, you know."

The Mad Hatter's Tea Party, you see, was reminiscent of the Annual Walkabout of July 1, 2009, in Hongkong. Or should that be the other way round? We were approaching Pacific Place and it, being very hot, I decided that it was time for tea, after all. 'Why not?' I reasoned. 'After all, it was a holiday afternoon and, the sun, being high in the sky, only mad dogs and Englishmen come out when the sun is nigh ... or something like that.'

And that was my day at the Annual Hongkong Walkabout. Next year, I think I might miss the parade/charade because it is just too hot a time of the year for such exercise. The walkabout should be held in the winter months when the weather is cooler. July is not a good month for ladies of the best families to walk about in the dust and grime and to share the walk with people who not even know the reason for the walkabout. And, clearly, they know next to nothing of the French Revolution of 1789. I am sure that you would agree with me, My Dear Grandchild.

Talk to you next week.

Chief Lady

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