

**HANDS OFF,
CHIEF EXECUTIVE TUNG CHEE HWA!**

Like a pressure valve on a boiler, a free Press acts to promote and to encourage the integrity of Government; and, to serve the essential operating machinery of Government by being the loyal opposition when called upon so to do.

It can, at times, be the steel wool, scouring at the build-up of decaying matter, which has formed on Government machinery, causing that machinery to be no longer efficient.

At other times, it can be the dissenting voice of the consensus of a minority group, allowing Government to learn of the group's dissatisfaction to some piece of legislation, or of some act of Government, which is deemed to be not in the interests of that minority group.

The function of the Press, always: The dissemination of information without fear or favour.

Of late, there have been oblique calls for the Hongkong Press to have a social conscience, and to stop its alleged, avowed intent to create wealth for its proprietors ... and little else.

Even the Chief Executive of the Hongkong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has sung the same tunes, suggesting angular restraints of the Press of these 412-odd square miles – although he has been quick to add that he was not intending Press control.

At least, not yet.

However, he did not rule out control of the HKSAR Press.

What is not explicit may be considered implicit, over time, since Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa would not make mention of his concern, about the HKSAR Press, or some rebel HKSAR medium, if he were not, covertly, considering how to execute controls of the Press when needs be such.

It is possible that Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa is the echo chamber of Beijing, where it is legend that Press control is the key to peace and financial prosperity in Government circles.

This puts all political hearts at ease in Beijing, it has been said.

Since about 1993 – perhaps even earlier – the Press of the HKSAR has adopted a self-imposed restraint on political and mogul reporting. Mention of this has caused the more vociferous members of the HKSAR Press to denounce the suggestion as being utter rubbish.

Although this is often denied, one sees, today, very little severe criticism of Government, the Chief Executive of the HKSAR, or any of his underlings, and, certainly, the most well-heeled members of this society are never criticized, too harshly.

Today, the Press, and/or any member of it, is doing a grave disservice to the people of the HKSAR if it fears that printing the truth, or commenting, negatively, on the actions of a member of this Government, may put an Editor, a columnist, or a publisher in danger -- which could be either physical and/or financial.

A free Press is like a fresh breeze that blows through a mountain pass on a sunny spring morning, causing floral and fauna to wake to the morning call of life.

Clearly, it is better to have the free Press comment, even when it gets it badly wrong, than to have a Press, which is afraid of retribution. Such retaliatory retribution could be very swift in the HKSAR of today should that which is published be deemed contrary to the wishes of the State, one of its members, or simply twisting the tail of a mogul who has money, but little else.

One of the first things that Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States (1801-1809), wanted to put right, following the War of Independence (1775-1783), in what was then British America, was to have a free Press in the United States.

This was a far cry from the tyrannical constraints, imposed by 18th Century England, where the laws of libel (criminal and civil) were draconian, and where debtors' prison was an accepted, and encouraged, form of punishment for those journalists who could not pay fines, imposed by the Court, for overstepping the boundaries of what was, then, permitted to be published without sanction.

Thomas Jefferson considered the way in which the Press of England was controlled to be abhorrent, and an ugly blot on any free society.

In his Presidential Inaugural Speech of 1801, he said:

'Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have been called by different names: Brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans; we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this union, or to change its Republican form, let them stand, undisturbed, as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it ...'.

There is no difference between a free Press and free speech, for they go hand in hand, one complementing the other. They spring from the same source – free thought.

Any medium, which consistently gets it wrong, signs its own death warrant: No Government office or individual need fear an irresponsible Press for, by its very nature, it destroys itself. It harbours the seeds of its own self-destruction, seeds, which germinate with irresponsibility.

And, like the phoenix, rising from the ashes of a defunct organ of the Press will rise a new medium, learning (one would hope) from the mistakes of its predecessor.

Electronic publishing is the future, and no Government of the world, today, can brake the tide of the electronic revolution.

The 21st Century will soon be upon us with a faster and more reliable means of communication. Revolutionary changes in the means of the dissemination of information will, inevitably, shape the thinking of all men, during the new millennium.

Any Government that thinks it can stop the electronic typhoon of change, in order to control the Press, is a Government, which is doomed to extinction.

While the world may, disparagingly, state that the United States is trying to act as the international policeman, flexing its muscles in many parts of the world (sometimes wrongly, also), nobody can criticize that the avowed intent of American foreign policy generally speaking, is based on noble intentions.

This is unlike the Japanese Government's foreign policy during the 1930s and 1940s, or the policy of Adolf Hitler and his Third Reich, from 1939 to 1945.

The 50 million dead people, the legacy of World War II, stand testament to the nefarious intent of these 2 Governments of yore.

One cannot ascribe nefarious intent to the Government of President Clinton, but perhaps the US Government could, rightly, be criticized for believing that the way of life of the United States, or the political posture of the Government of the United States, is the only way of life.

Democracy, that is pure democracy, has never been exercised in United States or anywhere else: What has been exercised is a representative form of democracy.

In today's world, it is probably fair to say that the English and American democratic models are the best models of democracy that one may have in this world.

But the United States has 223 years of refining its form of democratic Government, and its many volumes of law books have helped to shape what is, today, without question: One of the best hopes of the free world.

Having said that, it is unlikely that the US or British form of democracy would work if introduced into the People's Republic of China (PRC), at this juncture in history.

If it were introduced, tomorrow morning, anarchy would ensue, and there would, most likely, be chaos. One recalls the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and what befell to that system of government,

A gradual transition to a more democratic system in the PRC Government must come in the future, and the PRC Government Ministers cannot stem the flood of opinion, yearning for freedom to think, to seek refuge in the religion of choice, or, simply, to want to live without fear.

Again, Thomas Jefferson: *'The God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time ...'*

A government, which does not have the support of the people that it claims to govern, is no government at all.

A good Government is like a good marriage: It has to be constantly nurtured and reinforced.

The individual must be protected from the State, and the State must work for the benefit of the individual. For the individual is greater than the State.

A free Press is a safeguard for the people of the State. To restrain the Press, or to try to control the Press, is the best formula for disaster within the State.

So, please, hands off, Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa!

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