

OPINION

South China Morning Post

The world is watching

Hong Kong has a celebrated place in history as a safe haven for revolutionaries: Sun Yat-sen, Ho Chi Minh and José Rizal spent time here fine-tuning ideological positions, formulating strategies and gathering support. Edward Snowden, the 29-year-old former CIA

employee who has chosen our city as a base from which to unmask the American secret security community's alleged excesses, does not intend to overthrow a regime, but he is driven by the same zeal for change. He has put his faith in our freedoms, reputation and rule of law. As the US ponders what to do about the whistle-blower, we have to be acutely aware that the world is watching our government's every move.

Snowden's campaign does not directly involve Hong Kong. It is centred on the US National Security Agency and its secret surveillance programme. Documents he passed on to *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* newspapers detailing how his country pries into the digital communications of citizens, Americans and otherwise, are eye-opening; every activity can be observed, it would seem. The US government views revealing such information as a grave crime and it pushes for long prison sentences for offenders.

That reality has sent Snowden fleeing to our shores; he has been in hiding since May 20 in a hotel, from which he revealed his identity and cause on Sunday. His fight, he says, is about protecting internet freedoms, privacy, and basic liberties. Hong Kong, he contends, upholds these fundamental rights and its government is independent-minded. Beijing's sovereignty also likely comes into his calculations.

The timing of his going public is interesting: within hours of the end of the first summit between presidents Xi Jinping (習近平) and Barack Obama at which greater co-operation was the focus. The US has had an extradition treaty with Hong Kong since 1996 and rarely in that time have American requests to hand over suspects been rejected. There is a provision, though, for a denial of political cases and Snowden could easily argue that his is in this category. Ultimately, though, Beijing is in charge of Hong Kong's foreign policy and it has the final say.

Much is at stake for the Sino-American relationship and Hong Kong's reputation. Our respect for rights and freedoms and our judicial system are our strengths; they are why so many companies decide to be based here. As Snowden's case unfolds, we need to be mindful of our city's place and role in history.

Road pricing is the best way to go

All too often we are reminded of worsening congestion or pollution on our roads. The latest example concerns both. The Transport Department says private car ownership in Hong Kong rose 25 per cent in a decade to 63.4 cars per 1,000 people last year, while the length of road per person

rose by only 1.7 per cent in the same period. So we waste more time and suffer more stress getting anywhere while we breathe more polluted air.

The Central-Wan Chai bypass will not give each driver much more road on average. But the expected completion in 2016 seems the earliest we can expect an effective package of measures to discourage unnecessary car ownership and usage, and convince people they are better off using our fine bus and rail systems. Key among them is electronic road pricing, which has reduced traffic congestion and pollution in London and Singapore. Officials say it cannot be introduced for the most congested areas of Hong Kong Island until the bypass provides an alternative. That is debatable. As Undersecretary for the Environment Christine Loh Kung-wai told a recent air quality conference, Hong Kong was the first city in the world to study electronic road pricing, but more than 30 years later still had not reached a consensus about it.

Consensus means agreement with or acceptance of a point of view or course of action within a group, which taken literally is a recipe for inaction. Practical consensus sometimes calls for disregard for a rump of self-interested dissent that ill serves the majority or public interest. In this case public health is a good example of the latter.

Other measures to discourage ownership and use of private cars depend on enforcement. Electronic road pricing, which can be flexible according to peak and off-peak hours, gets round this problem and ensures that busy roads are used mainly by people who really need to. Combined with existing high fuel taxes and vehicle licensing fees it offers the most effective incentive to responsible car ownership and usage.

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Under fire.

Do you agree with one critic that the MTR Corporation is being "stingy" with the decision to give fare concessions of just HK\$200 million this year, which is only a third of the concessions it gave last year?

LETTERS

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Urgent action needed to save dolphins

Urgent action is needed to conserve and rebuild the Chinese white dolphin population, in the wake of alarming news last month that the 2012 figures for the numbers of dolphins inhabiting Hong Kong waters were even lower than in 2011 (78 compared with 158 in 2003).

The dolphins are one of the best-protected species in Hong Kong, with, for example, a dedicated marine park and the special attention given to them as a "sensitive receiver" in environmental impact assessments. The dramatic drop in numbers demonstrates that the systems in place to protect this iconic species have failed spectacularly, and are in immediate need of an overhaul.

As the government is still dithering, we need the Advisory Council on the Environment (ACE), our ultimate environmental watchdog, to conduct an independent review on what has gone wrong and take steps to redress the balance, including asking the following questions.

Firstly, is construction of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau bridge responsible for the most recent decline in dolphin numbers? Are numbers declining on the mainland side of the Pearl River estuary too?

If so, how is the Highways Department going to respond and under what circumstances would construction temporarily be halted?

Secondly, why were the two new marine parks proposed in 2002 for the dolphins at southwest Lantau and the Soko Islands never endorsed? Why has commercial fishing still not been banned in our existing marine parks despite the government pledging to do so in 2008?

Thirdly, what can be done to restore the numbers of dolphins and ensure their long-term survival?

There must be a moratorium on new reclamations in waters inhabited by the dolphins until the ACE review has been completed, and a proactive management plan put into place. Adding pressure to the environment before then risks sending the dolphins into irreversible free fall. The Chinese white dolphin cannot be al-

lowed to go the way of the green turtle, once common here in the summer months but now on the verge of extinction as the government reacted too little, too late.

Andy Cornish, Sheung Wan

Wildlife and countryside threatened

It is not feasible to develop part of Lantau into a commercial zone in order to divert tourists from crowded urban districts.

Although there is no doubt that the idea is a positive development in terms of fostering tourism and creating employment for Hong Kong citizens, there are drawbacks.

Residents in the handful of small, sleepy towns on Lantau closest to the proposed commercial centre will be miserable. There will be changes that will permanently affect their lives and livelihoods. People will also be disturbed by the construction work.

Opponents of the proposal also have environmental concerns. The zone will have an adverse effect on the landscape of Lantau and on wildlife, in particular the Chinese white dolphins.

There is little that can be done about the huge areas of land that have been dug up and built over, but if any project goes ahead, the effect on the dolphins will have to be closely monitored. There are few guarantees that the dolphins will be unaffected by any development.

Disneyland and the airport have already had a huge impact on Lantau.

Surely, the government has a responsibility to protect Hong Kong's natural environment.

Michael Ng, Ma On Shan

Better than any man-made attractions

I used to think Hong Kong was a unique place because of Ocean Park, Disneyland and our shopping malls, but when I went on a field trip with my school in 2010 I discovered that what makes it so special is the Chinese white dolphin.

The dolphins were amazing and I could not believe they were right here in Hong Kong.

Disneyland, Ocean Park and all the malls cannot possibly replace the pink dolphins. Now that I know that they are critically endangered because of our actions, the loss of these creatures makes me a lot less interested in Hong Kong's man-made attractions.

Gisele LaJeunesse, Sai Kung



Chinese white dolphins swim off Lantau. Photo: K. Y. Cheng

Car-park queues are bringing Tsim Sha Tsui to a standstill

I note that Shalom Levy ("HK risks being held hostage to Occupy Central troublemakers", May 31) gives his address as Tsim Sha Tsui. Does he ever go out?

As a fellow resident, I would question why he is so upset about an action that may happen a year from now when far closer to home we have an ongoing Occupy Tsim Sha Tsui in full swing, kicking off on Thursday evenings around 8pm through to Sunday evening.

I refer to the long lines of idling cars queuing up to get into local malls, K11, The One, Miramar, iSquare and Harbour City. Completely ignoring the "Full Up" signs, drivers join already long queues that bring circulation in the district to a complete standstill.

They ignore double yellow lines, yellow boxes and, at zebra crossings, pedestrians are forced to all but climb over the bonnets to reach the other side of the street.

This is all accompanied by belching fumes and blaring horns as regular through traffic is brought to a halt.

Under current police policy, officers are required to give verbal warnings only, so drivers can be as arrogant as they please as nothing short of bloodshed on the streets will incur a penalty.

This almost occurred on the evening of June 1 when a driver held up by the K11 queue on Camarvon Road was in a collision with a pedestrian.

This occupation takes over local streets for hours every weekend. At what cost to our economy?

Hong Kong people no longer come to the district to dine and shop because of the degraded environment.

When you say you live in Tsim Sha Tsui, a pitiful glance goes your way, with a "How can you stand it?"

Tourists, now mostly from the mainland, come here, but for how long?

In time they too will venture further afield and find more pleasant neighbourhoods to spend their dollars in.

Central has a nine-to-five economy. Tsim Sha Tsui is busy from early morning to early morning.

Occupation of streets here has a far greater impact on commercial life than in an office-only district.

It is obvious that gridlock on our streets is increasing in line with the increment in the ownership of private vehicles.

Instead of fretting about Occupy Central, Mr Levy and fellow members of the Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce should be making a noise about the impact Occupy Tsim Sha Tsui has on the economy in this district.

Mary Melville, Tsim Sha Tsui

Beijing right to fight bullying tactics of EU

It is nice to see that China has finally refused to be bullied by the European Commission ("EU slaps tough tariff on Chinese solar panels", June 5).

The commission's latest decision to impose tariffs on solar panels is mind-boggling.

A vast majority of the EU member states are opposed to these tariffs.

Nevertheless, Karel De Gucht, the EU trade commissioner, went ahead and levied them.

While Mr De Gucht, who had an unsuccessful career in his home country Belgium, clearly suffers from a Napoleon complex, he should have thought twice before making his latest move.

China has a strong case to retaliate with tariffs on wine imports.

In fact, Beijing should widen the scope and include other agricultural imports from the EU.

It is an open secret that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is a boondoggle that mainly supports big farmers or vanity projects.

It is because of wasteful schemes such as the CAP that the finances of the EU are in such a deplorable state, not to mention the substantial tax-

free salaries of Brussels bureaucrats like Mr De Gucht.

Kristiaan Helsen, Clear Water Bay

Laws can help to curb light pollution

The problem of light pollution in Hong Kong is so serious and it can affect the health of some citizens.

When the level of light pollution is particularly serious, in areas such as Tsim Sha Tsui, residents living nearby could have difficulty sleeping.

Having so many brightly lit advertising hoardings is proof that Hongkongers' level of environmental awareness is not very high.

The best way to deal with this problem is through legislation.

It will not be easy to get a law passed, but it is the most effective way to deal with this problem.

Any law should force shops to dim or switch off their lights between 11pm and 6am to ensure that the sleep of nearby residents is not disturbed.

Education is also important so that people learn to be more aware of the effects of this form of pollution.

Lydia Leung, Ma On Shan

Rice from mainland is safe to eat

Press reports last month commented on high levels of cadmium being found in rice on sale in Guangzhou.

Some reports were misleading, suggesting that there was a cancer risk connected to the findings.

One of the best-known cadmium pollution accidents happened in Toyama Prefecture, Japan.

Women and children consumed polluted rice containing cadmium. They suffered from bone pain. The name given for what they suffered was itai-itai disease, which described those in serious pain ("it hurts-it hurts"). Those with cancer did not get it from eating cadmium-polluted rice.

Cadmium may be carcinogenic when related to occupational health. For some particular kinds of work, employees may have inhaled cadmium. They may be at higher risk of cancer than those people not in a working environment where cadmium can be inhaled.

The mode of intake has to be considered when suggesting that the presence of cadmium is, or is not, carcinogenic.

I believe rice from the mainland that is being sold in Hong Kong is safe to consume. I have studied the cadmium levels of rice sold in Hong Kong that originated from seven countries. Two rice samples were from Guangdong province. The cadmium levels were so low as to not have any toxic effect on people.

Although the reported cadmium levels of rice were high on the mainland, we need not worry about the rice we eat here.

Felix Mak Hoi-kuoh, Kowloon Bay

Racial abuse has no place in world city

The report about racial abuse hurled at the visiting Philippine football team, here for a friendly match, and at their supporters by a section of the Hong Kong crowd should be a big wake-up call to those who like to think of Hong Kong as Asia's world city ("Filipinos backed over soccer taunts", June 6).

No place that aspires to be civilised, let alone a "world" city, whatever that means, should tolerate such behaviour.

As for the Hong Kong Football Association (HKFA), which cannot take action because it has not received a complaint, it is hard to imagine a more pathetic response.

At the end of May, Fifa president Sepp Blatter announcing new initiatives to combat racism and discrimination in football. He condemned the politics of hate, racism, ignorance, discrimination and prejudice which has so marred the game.

If the HKFA takes no action, Fifa should consider severing its links with a place so at odds with its prevailing values, so that there will be no more "friendly" international matches involving Hong Kong.

Gladys Li, Admiralty