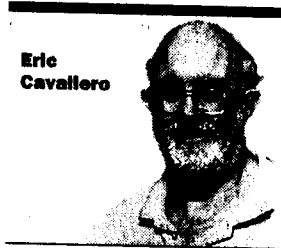


Adhering to principle more vital than ever

JOURNALISTS tend to be cynics. Their ears prick up any time a public figure begins speaking about matters of principle — especially if that public figure seems to be suggesting that their principles are of a higher standard than everyone else's.



Eric Cavallero

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In the weeks running up to tonight's handover, Chief Secretary Anson Chan Fang On-sang has been talking about principle.

Caesar decreed that his wife must be above suspicion. So must the woman who is about to become the second-in-command of the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong.

Is she a woman of principle? Has she adhered to those principles throughout her career?

In her long service with the government, she has had to make decisions which have not been subject to microscopic examination. Do any need closer scrutiny? Especially during her time as Secretary for Economic Services from 1987 to 1993?

One of the more controversial decisions she had to make during that period concerned China Light and Power's 1990 proposal to build its 6,000-megawatt power station at Black Point in Tuen Mun.

CLP gave environmental considerations as primary reasons for choosing Black Point for the proposed station. But many environmentalists still expressed concerns about the project.

In October 1992, for example, the Environmental Pollution Advisory Committee (Epcom) asked CLP for copies of a study into health hazards to residents near the proposed power line. Epcom warned that the proposed pylons at Black Point could pose health risks to residents.

According to CLP, the huge electricity generations were needed to ensure Hong Kong's growth without the fear of a power shortfall or even a blackout.

Nevertheless, critics have questioned whether the plant was needed. In 1994, legislator Christine Loh quoted Mrs Chan as saying: "When we talk about building new generating facilities in Hong Kong, it is not to build new facilities to cope with the increase in demand, but rather to have a bigger reserve capacity so that in case of maintenance or repair when we have to stop some units, we would have enough power to cope with demand."

Focus on financing

Ms Loh added: "Of course there must be capacity to cope with maintenance or repair, but with the addition of Daya Bay, CLP will have a 70 per cent reserve capacity even during peak demand.

"When demand is greatest, the utility will still only be using a third of its total generating capacity. This contrasts with the United States, where the common reserve capacity is usually 15 to 20 per cent."

Let's switch to London, where in 1991 and 1992, there were a number of major parliamentary rows over Conservative Party financing.

In April 1992, Peter Hain, Labour MP for Neath, tabled a House of Commons motion saying Asil Nadir, the former chairman of the bankrupt Polly Peck empire, had made donations to the Tories without disclosures in his company's account.

In reply, Chris Patten, who was then the Conservative party chairman, insisted that the Tories had acted in good faith in receiving donations of £440,000 to party funds from Mr Nadir.

There were other reports at around the same time of donations by Hong Kong businessmen to the British Conservative Party. A story in October that year suggested that the late Lord Kadoorie, former chairman of CLP, might have made a gift to the Tories.

Mrs Chan was then Secretary of Economic Services. CLP's Black Point proposal subsequently went through. And Mrs Chan later became Chief Secretary.

How does Mrs Chan view this sequence of events in retrospect? Were any principles compromised? No one is suggesting they were. But the question needs to be asked on this last day of British sovereignty over Hong Kong.

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