

*“Perhaps the introduction of the International Cricket Sixes may help to take cricket into Communist China and turn them into capitalists”*

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## THE HANDOVER

The economy was hot in late 1996 and the Hong Kong property market was even hotter. Some thought it was overheated. Transaction prices on all sectors went through the roof and record highs were set almost every passing week. There was a buying frenzy. Property units were changing hands almost daily. Big money came across the border from the Mainland. This phenomenon carried over to 1997, the year of the handover whereby sovereignty over Hong Kong would be transferred from Britain to China. Property trading at record highs was seen by some observers as the last hurrah before the end of British rule, or was it the beginning of another regime where the locals saw it as the return to the motherland?

By the end of 1996, Tung Chee-hwa had already been elected by the Election Committee of 400, of which I was a member, as the first Chief Executive Designate of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, or the HKSAR. This would come into effect on 1st July 1997. The HKSAR was to be governed on the principle of “One Country, Two Systems”.

The handover was to be a momentous event in history. It was to be the first time that a former British colony would not turn independent, but rather come under the sovereignty of another master. The “One Country, Two Systems” concept of government was unique and untried in the world. There were regular commentaries, debates and speculations on how this would really work out.

The sceptics were dominated by the non-Chinese residents and foreigners. Many expatriates elected to leave Hong Kong, but some long-term Hong Kong belongers made peace with the imminent change and decided once and for all to commit to Hong Kong as their long-term home. One thing was for certain. The handover did force decisions on people which they would not have taken were it not for its imminence.

As we ran into 1997, Hong Kong became the focus of international attention. Nations began to prepare for attendance at the handover celebrations and named the representatives they would send for the ceremony. Some global leaders would use the opportunity for political networking. Locally, a high-powered task force was assembled, charged with the responsibility of organizing all the proceedings and main events. More importantly, because of the political impasse which existed between China and Britain, the arrangements and identities of the dignitaries from these central players remained undefined.

Peter Woo tried his hand in politics by entering the race for Chief Executive of the HKSAR. After surviving the first round shake-out, he eventually lost out in the final round to Tung. Nevertheless, Peter satisfied himself for making his mark in politics in Hong Kong. His very well thought out “manifesto” presented a political platform which was widely regarded as the most professionally put-together political message put forward by the candidates. He therefore rightly considered that the effort was worth it as the process no doubt raised his profile.

Because of his entry into the political field, Peter’s exposure became more pronounced internationally. During the run-up to the handover,

numerous commercial and political leaders sought to make personal visits to Peter. Amongst them was the late Richard Holbrooke, the much respected and reliable envoy who served various presidents of the United States, and I found him an engaging person. Inevitably, I was roped in to assist in arrangements or to hold forerunning meetings with those visitors. I did as directed, but in reality, these exposures also raised my own profile, albeit at a lower level. Regardless, many of the friends made over that period became valuable networking connections for the times ahead.

In the handover week, senior executives from most of the large commercial firms were invited to celebration events, hosted separately either by the British or by the Chinese. Many were invited by both sides and this created logistical problems as the dress codes were often different, yet there was inadequate time between the parties to run home to change. Appropriate apparel thus had to be brought to a midway location in a central hotel in close proximity to the party venues to allow us to change conveniently. It was a nightmare, but made even more awkward by the closure of vital roads for security reasons. Any attempt to drive home would have been futile.

Closer to the day, many senior executives and officials were running around frantically, particularly those involved with any part of the organizing which had to be precisely coordinated. It was complicated. It was revealed at a late stage that Prince Charles would represent Her Majesty and the Prime Minister Tony Blair would be here with Governor Patten to form the official delegation from Britain. President Jiang Zemin would lead the official delegation for China.

The population was still kept guessing whether the People's Liberation Army or the PLA would cross the border in numbers with tanks and heavy armour in a show of military might or otherwise. Although a PLA presence to replace the British Forces would have been completely logical, there were those who were apprehensive, particularly people from

abroad. I recall friends from England calling me to ask daft questions like “Are you about to be occupied by those people from across the border?” Such misguided thoughts might have been fanned by the international media, including some 24-hour news channels.

We felt no such apprehension. Gossip and rumours always start from afar and generally get vastly exaggerated. Those of us on the spot knew better.

The handover came and went with the celebration events taking place in the midst of a heavy downpour. We did not know whether this could be read as some sort of omen. The Union Jack was lowered and handed to Chris Patten to the beautiful bagpipes sound of *Highland Cathedral*, later to be carried to the Royal Yacht *Britannia* which would sail away after midnight in a final farewell. China’s flag was officially hoisted as the sovereign standard with pomp and ceremony for the first time in Hong Kong.

A new era had begun. I was consumed by mixed emotions. There was every reason to welcome in the future, as China’s economic might would support Hong Kong commercially for a long time if we played our cards right. Yet I could not help feeling there would be aspects of social life that I would miss. I realized once again how British I was in my habits and how much I loved cricket, dry humour and time spent with my good friends over a few wee drams of single malt.

I recall an article written by my friend Gerry Delilkhan in 1992 which seemed relevant in a warped way. Gerry wrote in appreciation of the inaugural International Cricket Sixes these lines: “I have long held a theory that no cricket-playing country will ever go communist. Some have come close to it, but none so far have fallen. Is the converse possible? If one teaches Marxist ideologues cricket, will they abandon Marx?” He followed on: “Cricketers are a strange breed of evangelists. Witness how the British succeeded in lodging the game in far-flung parts of their empire. They did such a good job, perhaps to their eternal regret, that

teams from Australia, the West Indies, Pakistan, India and New Zealand now routinely beat the English at their national sport. So will the last remnant of the empire – Hong Kong – take cricket to the Chinese and eventually China?” Whilst no doubt written with tongue in cheek, Gerry’s message somehow looks more appropriate now than in 1992 or even at the advent of the Hong Kong handover.

Today, there are more millionaires in China than in most other places. Their businessmen are all practising capitalism disguised in the politically more correct description as market economy. As for cricket, many Chinese on the Mainland are now learning to play the game. In fact China would send a team to participate in the latest Sixes to be held in November 2010, and China’s ladies cricket team competes regularly against our ladies in Hong Kong.

Like many others, I was utterly exhausted after burning the candle at both ends over a sustained period of time. I needed some peace and quiet to recuperate. The family had planned for a month’s break at our home in Russell starting mid-July, and I was looking forward to that in anticipation. It was the rest that I needed.