

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, September 24, 2019.

*Opinion*

# The protests can end constructively for Hong Kong and Beijing, but neither side is showing the courage required



- Hong Kong's protesters should stop the violence and all sides should start planning for a more representative government
- And both Hongkongers and Americans should forget about US involvement, which can only hold the democracy movement back

**Tom Plate**

Published: 6:00am, 22 Oct, 2019

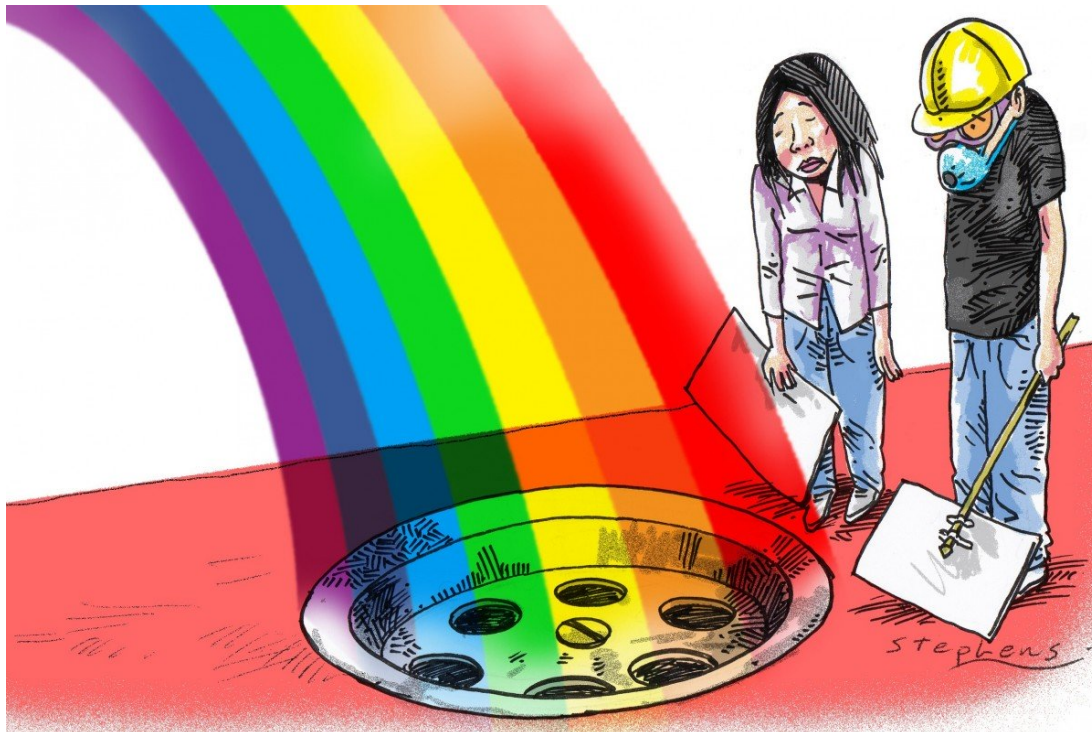


Illustration: Craig Stephens

Not every “pro-democracy/anti-government” protester is alike; not all are actors, and the violent ones are violently beyond compassion or support. But all of them – brave or brutal alike – share one thing: They feel they have no voice in how they are governed.

Taking on that challenge, especially regarding “young people’s worries”, was something Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor promised in her 2017 inauguration. Improvement has been slow in coming. How much hope for the future can we all have if the young feel there is none? Without hope they cannot stop themselves; they are so angry they do not even want to stop.

How to give hope to the Protester Generation? The answer will determine nothing less than the future of Hong Kong. Inside the claustrophobic cocoon of the special administrative region, the atmosphere is all poison and few can see past the latest street spasm; seen from almost anywhere else, it would appear no side in the battle is doing the one thing that can bring back the fresh air, bring back hope – and fit Hong Kong back into one piece. And that is to begin to talk to one another in a civil manner befitting a society that believes it deserves a system uniquely its own – and not the mainland's.

As John F. Kennedy famously wrote in *Profiles in Courage*: “We shall need compromises in the days ahead, to be sure. But these will be, or should be, compromises of issues, not of principles. We can compromise our political positions, but not ourselves ... Compromise does not mean cowardice. Indeed, it is frequently the compromisers and conciliators who are faced with the severest tests of political courage as they oppose the extremist views of their constituents.”

It is past time for all sides to accept that everyone has made their point, and therefore it is utterly pointless, perhaps even degrading and evil, to go on like this. But crowds – anywhere, everywhere – are not renowned for high-level thinking; surging protesters and anti-crowd forces, such as the police, rarely improve the dialogue.

The well-known author Douglas Murray (*The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity*) is not speaking specifically to Hong Kong but to a global commons when he decries the qualitative decay of the public space: “Today nearly all public discussion has become impossible. Which is why nearly all public thinking has become impossible. Which is why the thinking has gone bad on nearly every major issue facing us.”

In this spirit, the good people of Hong Kong might look in the mirror and see something not unlike the self-immolating Gotham City depicted at the end of the new movie *Joker*. Art following life or life following art? The character of the lead, portrayed by Joaquin Phoenix, reflects a fractured personality – a flailing entity coming apart at the seams and, misstep after misstep, careering into existential hell. From Barcelona to Santiago to Lebanon to Haiti to Hong Kong to ... who's next? What seemed to have been working no longer seems to suffice.

Though the battle for Hong Kong is a world story, its divisive issues will have to be talked out inside the special administrative region, with the conversation respected by the masters in Beijing. On July 2, this column suggested Beijing officials needed to “avoid the routine style of mainland governance or [“one country, two systems”] would blow up in your face ... [and] push the prodigal special administrative region into the streets, making it a political runaway, and inspiring every anti-unification soul in Taiwan with reason for further resistance”.

It is difficult for Americans to keep their silence and poise about what they perceive as a nascent democracy movement, especially when America is asked to get involved.

I wish we Americans were somewhat more discerning, staying out of others' business when we have so much to fix at home. If the US House of Representatives' effort (the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act) to show pro-democracy solidarity, not to mention the visits of pompous US Senator Ted Cruz and others, turn out to have any effect, it won't be to soften high-ranking hearts in Beijing.

And think again before wanting the US to get further involved. Our own current leader, after all, was “elected” not by a majority but by an antiquated system that vitiates the overall voice of the people. Our electoral college produced Donald Trump; Beijing's functional/geographical representation system produced Lam. Enough said?

Hong Kong's Legislative Council, credibility limited, needs to erect a thoughtful architecture for all issues under the umbrella of a truth and reconciliation commission. Via a special election, its members should be directly elected.

After the chief executive is permitted by Beijing to resign, her successor Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, the current chief secretary, would require a full report on how Hong Kong's local government can strengthen the quality of its representation. The Xi administration should accept new ideas and a new compromise plan for a less restrictive election system to move Hong Kong towards more representation, not less.

A well-functioning Hong Kong with regained poise serving West and East is vital. Most of all, it would show that public discussion by responsible citizens remains a commanding force in our best politics. We Americans, as well as all our friends in Hong Kong, would find this inspirational.

But hope has no future if the street protests proceed apace, and Beijing must know that this revolution of hearts and minds in the streets cannot be the same way as Tiananmen was. The grand restabilisation will require immense courage, patience and discipline, but this war must not go on.

**Tom Plate is Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Affairs and the Pacific Century Institute's vice-president**