

The good, bad and ugly sides of rail debate

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After every major campaign, the government typically conducts a "postmortem" examination to dissect what went wrong and what it got right. Although the government has not exactly hit a home run in securing HK\$66.9 billion in funding from the Legislative Council for the construction of the express rail line, officials probably feel they finally have some cause for celebration.

Who are the good, the bad and the ugly in this debate? The usual suspects are the officials, the politicians, the demonstrators and Hong Kong's chattering classes. As the battle was fought mostly in the Legco chambers until the final stages, the chief protagonists were transport secretary Eva Cheng and her team, the anti-express-rail legislators and, outside Legco, the groups opposed to its construction. As usual, the minister was criticised for insufficient consultation, giving evasive answers to legislators' questions and lacking courage in facing up to protesters besieging Legco.

However, officials seldom have much to gain from public polemics. In handling pub-

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lic consultation over contentious subjects, the official in charge has to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of inadequate consultation and over-heroic engagement, which risks sparking more protest.

As a minister in a government with low approval ratings headed by an embattled chief, Cheng did as well as she could in mustering sufficient support within Legco to ensure funding was secured, avoid gaffes that could stoke a backlash and strike the right public profile – combining firmness with tact and rationality.

In comparison, before the landmark vote and the ensuing protests, interventions by the most senior leaders of government were conspicuous by their absence.

The politicians had a field day of public grandstanding in the course of painfully prolonged, televised debates totalling more

than 24 hours. Legislators from the League of Social Democrats pushed filibustering to the limits, while greenhorn legislator Paul Tse Wai-chun, from the tourism sector, snatched a few moments in the limelight by joining the fight. Other legislators opposed to the project kicked up as much trouble as they could by revisiting vexing issues.

Meanwhile, supporters of Kam Sheung Road in Yuen Long as an alternative terminus site failed to show how their plan could avoid the same problems of possible immigration delays, cost overruns and hardship caused by evictions and clearances.

As for the demonstrators, the protest against the rail project soon became a proxy for the fight against obstruction of the "will of the people" by legislators elected in functional constituencies. Yet, in their clamour for Western-style democracy, few protesters bothered about the principle of "supremacy" of the legislature manifested by laws against assaults, interference, obstruction or molestation of any legislator "going to, being within or going from the precincts of the chamber". Technically speaking, those

who blocked legislators from leaving Legco after the vote, or pursued them with jeers and insults, might have broken the law. As in any mass protest, respect for constitutional principles and balance between freedom of expression and the need for law and order went out the window.

In a way, legislators did not fare much better. The marathon debates exposed the lack of rules providing for "cloture" procedures that would bring an end to protracted debates in Finance Committee proceedings. The whole episode brought into sharp focus much that is unresolved and conflicting in Hongkongers' quest for democracy.

As for the commentators, Executive Council convenor Leung Chun-ying outperformed himself as the government's critic-in-chief – again. Yet, as former US president Bill Clinton said: "Talk is cheap. It's the policy, stupid." It is not hard to surmise which side Leung is on, and who the winners and losers are in this saga.

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Regina Ip Lau Suk-ye is a legislator and chairwoman of the Savantas Policy Institute

Legco protesters were well behaved

The majority of the media condemned the protesters [outside Legco] opposed to the government's proposals for the express rail link and blamed them for the violence.

Some lawmakers and officials also criticised the protesters for trying to disrupt social order.

However, I watched live coverage of the protests and I was disappointed by the government and the media. I think some media reports exaggerated the violence and ignored the unreasonable behaviour of police.

Most of the time, the protesters sat together in silence or sang. They got their message across in a peaceful manner. In fact, if anything, I thought they were too passive.

Many of these protesters actually support the building of an express rail link but are against the government plan in West Kowloon.

They back an option that would be cheaper.

The government did not present a strong enough case for its version and yet urged Legco to approve it.

Some positive amendments were rejected, which angered the protesters outside Legco.

If the government and the lawmakers who supported it do not improve, we will see larger protests in the future. The government and media must take a balanced approach to these protests.

The post-80s groups have made full use of the internet to get their message across.

The government must recognise this and take note of the views of the public, which are expressed online.

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There is much room for improvement

Following the vote in Legco approving the high-speed rail link, the government should be aware of the tough economic challenges that lie ahead - and it must do a better job than it has done up till now.

With increased government spending we could see growth in Hong Kong's gross domestic product.

Whether or not this happens will depend on how the government implements its economic policies.

It must increase demand for Hong Kong labour, goods and services.

This will potentially benefit individual consumption, long-term investments and savings. Price increases and inflation must be reined in.

To promote social harmony, the government needs to handle the resettlement issues properly. Also, when it comes to available job opportunities, priority must be given to those in need.

The aim should be to promote social harmony and, in the long term, ensure Hong Kong's integration with the rest of China.

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