**SCMP Article**

**Divided HK is a breeding ground for hatred**

It was a shock to hear of the killing of British Member of Parliament Jo Cox last week. Most of us in Hong Kong think of the UK as a stable and secure society with a long tradition of tolerance. We do not expect political violence in Britain – just as we do not expect it here in Hong Kong.

Many observers linked the killing to the referendum on the European Union. The vote is about membership of a complex international economic and political grouping. But, for many British people, much of the focus has been on immigration. Some parts of the British media have, for years, had an anti-immigrant agenda – pushing stories about foreigners who cheat on welfare or take local people’s jobs.

It now seems that the suspect in this killing had ties to racist organisations. Cox, on the other hand, had a reputation for a liberal stance on immigration and a humanitarian approach to refugees. (She worked for several years at Oxfam.)

Her murder occurred at a time when extremism seems to be on the rise in many advanced and supposedly tolerant societies. The triumph of Donald Trump in the US Republican primaries has shocked many moderates. Far-right sentiment has grown in much of Europe.

Some observers accuse the media of stirring up emotions – especially about immigration – and contributing to an atmosphere of hate. Another view is that we are seeing a backlash against business and political elite who are out of touch with ordinary people. Most likely, there is some truth in both these views.

We in Hong Kong should be concerned about this.

Hong Kong people value peaceful debate and openness. And we take our stability and security for granted. The idea of someone shooting a politician is virtually unthinkable in Hong Kong, where thankfully we have tight controls on firearms.

Where we have had politically inspired violence, it has been fairly low-level, but enough to be worrying. Pro-Beijing and pro-democracy groups shout at or push each other at protests. Activists have become physical against cross-border smugglers.

Our society is undoubtedly becoming more deeply divided along political and economic lines. We also have an extremely divided media scene. Our mainstream news outlets generally give space to pro-government views alongside moderate and opposition voices. But many of the younger generation, in particular, follow alternative online channels and social media, where relatively radical views are the norm.

The worst outbreak of violence we have seen for years was the disturbance in Mong Kok during the Lunar New Year. To much of the community, and to many mainstream media outlets, this was simple lawlessness.

To others, it was a sign of alienation or of out-of-touch governance. And, to activists and sympathisers, it was justifiable.

The most worrying thing is that many people are exposed to just one view, and have no tolerance at all for any alternative way of looking at things.

Politicians and parties are already preparing for the Legislative Council election in September. Not long after that, campaigning will begin, ahead of the chief executive election in March next year.

Given the growing divide in the community, these elections could become more emotional than any we have seen in Hong Kong in the past.

The process itself is bound to be controversial. The stalling of electoral reform means we are using a system that many oppose as lacking legitimacy.

But perhaps even more important is the social and economic split in the community. Despite government efforts to take action, issues like housing costs, retirement protection and health care funding remain controversial. Perceptions of rising inequality and unfairness are as strong as ever.

Hong Kong currently looks like fertile ground for hardliners on both sides who want to stir up intolerance and hatred. Let’s hope that – as in the UK following Jo Cox’s death – common sense and understanding will prevail.