**SCMP Article**

**Carrie Lam will still have to rely on old hands**

In barely six weeks’ time, a new government will take office in Hong Kong with Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor as chief executive. She has had only a few weeks since the election in March to prepare for this new administration. Her No 1 priority must be to assemble a team of principal officials.

The core are the “3+13” secretaries – the chief secretary, justice secretary and financial secretary, plus the ministers for such policy bureau areas as education, development and so on. Naturally, she will want the best people she can find. She is gathering names of possible candidates, and initially approaching people individually to see if they would be interested in serving in the new government.

Although this sounds straightforward, I think we can safely say the selection process is a challenge. Remember that this has had to happen in a short space of time. And bear in mind that we are not talking only about the search for the 16 secretaries – there are undersecretaries and other positions to be filled.

In my view, in order to be a candidate a potential principle official must meet five conditions.

First, they must be widely respected for all-round ability. They need to have media and people skills. Ideally, they should have some public-service experience, and recognised knowledge in the policy area concerned.

Second, they must be willing and able to work with the chief executive-elect and other future colleagues. They have to be personally compatible.

Third, they must be willing to work in the government, and ideally enthusiastic about the idea. If you know anything about the challenges of our political system and the internal divisions in our society, you will not be surprised to learn that this is a real barrier. A lot of people are happy to help from outside – but they do not want to get in the firing line.

Fourth, they must be acceptable to the central government in Beijing.

Fifth, they must be acceptable to the people of Hong Kong.

Even if a candidate can tick all these boxes, there are practical considerations that can still get in the way. For example, a candidate might have a passport from a foreign country. In some cases, renouncing foreign citizenship would be too time-consuming, or involve personal sacrifice. And of course there are other personal considerations, such as an individual’s other ambitions, or a need to put their family first.

The pool of possible candidates is also limited by the fact that politics is not a career in Hong Kong. There are not many routes from local to higher-level political office, or through political parties into government.

Given all these hurdles, we should not be surprised if we learn that Carrie’s transition team is looking for candidates among people who are already in government. I expect some people will groan at the idea of more civil servants and serving officials being moved into ministers’ positions. The idea of lots of “fresh faces” is superficially appealing.

Then again, some citizens might prefer the next administration to draw on in-house experience and talent. Given the challenges facing Hong Kong, this may not be a good time to parachute in a large number of outsiders, even if there were plenty to choose from. As I say, the new administration will need to recruit people for other positions like undersecretaries and political assistants. Given the difficulties in finding qualified senior officials, these positions are likely to produce some of our future political talent. Selecting people for these jobs will be of vital importance.

So the work of finding and finalising the new team is bound to be hard. We can expect some familiar faces, some less familiar ones and some brand new ones – from a mix of backgrounds. But don’t be surprised if a fair proportion come from inside government.

This should not mean that the next administration will lack fresh ideas. In her manifesto, Carrie has pledged to reach out and listen to different parts of the community. That willingness to consider views from beyond the normal corridors of power could be the biggest and best “fresh idea” of all. The truth is that we cannot rely on just 16 people, wherever they come from, for all the answers.