**SCMP Article**

**HK’s young and restless crave hope above all**

During his visit to Hong Kong last week, President Xi Jinping ( 習近平 ) addressed an audience of political and business leaders. He set them four tasks: support the new government, create unity, care for the youth and build cooperation with the mainland.

The fact that he specifically mentioned the young is important. Hong Kong has serious divisions, but I believe the greatest threat to our cohesion may be an increasingly resentful and even angry younger generation. This could be the greatest challenge facing new Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor.

Hong Kong is not alone in having a discontented younger population. In the lead-up to the UK general election, an incredible 70 per cent of under-25 voters reported supporting the opposition Labour Party. This was a bigger split than that between rich and poor, or pro- or anti-Brexit camps. One notable thing was that Labour actually focused more on attracting elderly voters.

US surveys show some 55 per cent of millennials, basically the under-35s , are pro-Democrat, compared with only 33 per cent who say they are pro-Republican. In both the US and UK, the over-50s lean far more to the right. Some analysts believe that relatively radical candidates like Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn or the Democratic Party’s Bernie Sanders could have won their countries’ recent elections – if their own parties had focused more on younger voters.

Commentators looking at the West come up with some consistent reasons for this radicalism among the young. These reasons should sound familiar to anyone concerned with the generational divide in Hong Kong.

Globalisation and technology have boosted growth, but unequally. While some groups have enjoyed rising incomes, median pay levels have stagnated. Something similar has happened with economic opportunities for the less skilled, and even for new graduates. The financial crisis of 2008 added to this. Low interest rates have increased asset prices, largely benefiting older people who own homes and financial assets. Governments have had to slash spending, but politicians have tended to put older constituents first. Younger people see housing prices out of reach. At the same time, they face rising education costs (student loans and tuition fees were key reasons for Corbyn’s and Sanders’ appeal to the young).

As in the West, Hong Kong politicians and officials have focused on the needs of the poor, the elderly and other deprived groups. This makes sense in terms of social welfare. The young missed the relative hardships (and rapid growth) of the 1950s to 1980s. They are far better educated than previous generations, and enjoy better material comforts. A recent report showed 80 per cent of Hong Kong’s millennials have begun retirement planning and investing.

Some unsympathetic older citizens see the young as spoilt or having unrealistic expectations. This is missing the point. This is not about simple distribution of wealth, but about a sense that the whole structure has become less fair to the young, and as a result there are fewer reasons for them to have hope for the future.

It should come as no surprise if young people in Hong Kong do not see our system as fair. Opportunities from mainland economic growth have benefited some economic activities but squeezed out others. For example, some retail sectors have boomed, but space for start-ups and entrepreneurs has become scarcer. There are examples of well-connected interests opposing change and innovation. Meanwhile, we see housing trends like barely affordable subdivided flats and luxury-priced micro flats.

These things are bound to create anger among the young. Public opinion surveys have shown a shocking decline in the number of young people in Hong Kong who consider themselves to have Chinese identity. I am fairly sure that – as with Occupy and similar movements – this is largely an expression of anger.

The new chief executive wants to boost affordable housing, economic opportunities and our education system, and develop a more inclusive and responsive style of government. Rather than see these in isolation, we should perhaps remember what the president said last week. We need to ask how our whole approach can give the younger generation hope for the future.