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You may have wondered why the recent appointment of Dr Patrick Ho as the Head of the Home Affairs Bureau appeared to create so much more comment and eyebrow-raising than any other of CH Tung's recent Ministerial appointments.

Let me remind you: Dr Ho is one of Hong Kong's top eye surgeons; indeed, a member of the establishment; he has never worked in the Public Service and was, until a few weeks ago, the Chairman of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. He is reputedly both a good friend of CH Tung and has ambitious plans to improve Hong Kong's cultural scene. He also craves publicity (good, of course) and acknowledgement for his various good deeds.

The public comments by a spokesperson for Zuni Icosahedron – an arts group that receives substantial funding from various public funding bodies including the Hong Kong Arts Development Council – criticized Dr Ho for having no experience of working within the Hong Kong Public Service. There is ill will towards Dr Ho for his widely reported comments of a few months ago that the Hong Kong Arts Development Council did not wish to support 'lazy artists'. Dr Ho's comments were unfortunate in their bluntness but the reality is that the pool of public money available to arts groups is limited and choices of who gets funding is inevitable.

Hong Kong's different arts groups are all competing for a small pool of money and the Hong Kong Arts Development Council – which is predominantly a funding body rather than an initiator of arts programmes - has to choose which of those groups are deserving. A recent contentious application by Zuni Icosahedron to the Hong Kong Arts Development Council for funding to entertain a group of international art critics passing through Hong Kong for a forthcoming conference in Guangzhou is probably one factor for their animosity towards Dr Ho.

The Hong Kong Arts Development Council controls roughly only 5% of government funding for the arts. The other 95% is controlled by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department: but most of this money is expended in employing middle management public servants.

The Leisure and Cultural Services Department is a department under the Home Affairs Bureau, and will now be under Dr Ho's responsibility. This Department is the old Urban and Regional Council without the food and environmental health functions. You may remember that the main argument at the time of disbanding the Urban and Regional Councils was to stop duplication and create a more efficient service. This has not eventuated. At the time, I thought that if the Urban and Regional Councils deserved to be disbanded it was for its ineptitude, lack of energy in promoting innovative cultural programmes, its self-serving maintenance of the *status quo* and protection of many surplus-to-need staff. Nothing has changed.

As the immediate past Chairman of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and now incumbent chief of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department Dr Ho was and is central to all of Hong Kong's recent and future public arts funding. I rather like Dr Ho's outspokenness – this is unusual for most of Hong Kong's public officials.

But let me remind Dr Ho of last year's Venice Biennial. This was an organizational disaster as I am sure Dr Ho is aware. The Arts Development Council organized Hong Kong's participation for the first time in this event rather than taking its usual role of initiating and funding. However, due to its lack of expertise as an organizer it was decided that decisions would be made at every stage by the full Board – yes, the Board - of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. Most other countries involved at the Venice Biennial sensibly give their own artistic curator full decision-making autonomy. Hong Kong's participation became a logistic nightmare because of its bureaucratic approach and for the participating artists, from my observations, it was a debilitating experience. Here is another example of officials being paranoid of delegating power and if you look at the toast-making and the resulting Venice Biennial press photographs you will notice that our arts bureaucrats took centre-stage and the whole art world noticed the absurdity.

Dr Ho's previous lack of experience of working in the public service definitely makes him, for me, an acceptable appointment. So, let me suggest that all arts groups and those 'in the know' restrain their criticism for the time being. But, if Dr Ho does not attempt to tackle Hong Kong's bloated arts bureaucracy then he deserves to open the inevitable floodgates of criticism.

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