

RTHK – Viewpoint 7 October 2003
by John Batten

Yesterday, the Society for Protection of the Harbour had a minor set-back in its battle to save Victoria Harbour. I say minor as there are two Judicial Reviews pending – the first in December that will decide whether the Wan Chai reclamation is lawful and the second, sometime next year that will rule whether the Central reclamation is justified.

The Society for Protection of the Harbour has the right to appeal yesterday's judgement – it has said that it will not, it is rightly throwing the gauntlet back to the government. And then earlier today the Executive Council said – in an almost face-savvily desperate decision - that it will resume work on the reclamation. The swords are now drawn and we can expect demonstrations, media comment and a PR campaign from the government to prove that this reclamation is in the public – hey, that's us – interest.

The Society for Protection of the Harbour actually won the right to seek Judicial Reviews for the Central and Wan Chai reclamations during the SARS crisis. Although briefly reported in newspapers, there was little analysis at the time. The hearing leading up to yesterday's injunction and the decision itself has focussed the media and the public about the issues involved: if the reclamations go ahead our harbour will be a pathetic narrow river - certainly not a Harbour; and as we already know – and acknowledged by the Judge in yesterday's injunction ruling – not Fragrant.

The process by which we now come to this point is complex. The Society for Protection of the Harbour is actually taking the Town Planning Board to court. This is the body that oversees, decides and advises about all aspects of our urban development. It is the Town Planning Board that has given approval to these two reclamation developments that will narrow our harbour. Let's be clear, the Star Ferry, for example, will be pushed a further half kilometre into the harbour – what is now a convenient and often quicker way to Tsim Sha Tsui will now become a marginal form of transport.

But who is the Town Planning Board? Who sits on it? Who are they? Seven members are ex-officio public servants – who also automatically take the chair and vice-chair positions. But who are they? On the Town Planning Board website there is a list of names of the lay members of the Board. But what are their affiliations? Their daytime jobs? Only by doing vague cross searches was I able to work out that the Board members are also District Councillors, academics, lawyers, teachers. They are not household names – indeed, they appear to be totally faceless. The term for the incumbent Town Planning Board members expires next April – I wonder who the next lot will be?

The Town Planning Board actually has a Vision Statement for Victoria Harbour. It reads: "To make Victoria Harbour attractive, vibrant, accessible, and symbolic of Hong Kong – a harbour for the people and a harbour for life."

That seems clear enough doesn't it? And that is why the Society for Protection of the Harbour is taking the Town Planning Board to court.

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