

First Person

Liberal Party chairman **James Tien Pei-chun** says explains why narrowing the poverty gap is not on his agenda. His family, incidentally, made a fortune in pants. By Winnie Yeung.



If I only make decisions based on votes, why bother?

I was born in Shanghai in 1947 and my family moved to Hong Kong two years later. I can barely speak Shanghainese.

When I was 17, I traveled to the States to study chemical engineering.

Remember the riots in 1967? I was lucky – I was studying in the States then. No one from my family told me about the riots.

The riots didn't really concern my family business. Our pants factory was on Castle Peak Road and we lived in Kowloon Tong – we weren't sure if the riot was in Tsim Sha Tsui or Central.

My wife and I met in college – she's Vietnamese-Chinese. In 1970, my father asked me to go back to Hong Kong to work for his factory. It seemed like a better idea to work for my dad than for both of us to look for jobs in the States.

She would never stop asking me when we would move back to the States. She finally stopped recently.

My father might have come from Shanghai, but he's no tycoon – he came to Hong Kong with empty pockets.

Your inheritance is important, but the knowledge that's passed on to you is equally important.

My father joined several consultative bodies for the government during 60s and 70s. That influenced me to enter politics – he told me about the other side of society.

I was appointed a district councilor for Kwai Ching in 1985, but I didn't represent the people living there. I represented the businesses as that's where my factory was.

Even when I was appointed to Legco in 1988, I kept the same stance: look at everything as a capitalist. I didn't pay too much attention to say, social welfare meetings.

My political attitude changed after I was chosen to lead the Liberal Party in 1998 – I started looking into more matters.

Hong Kong should import anyone with talent from anywhere in the world. It won't hurt the local job market. It would only make the pie bigger for everybody.

I don't care about the poverty gap – other political parties like to talk about it, but I don't.

Don't pull the rich people down to make the poor feel like the gap is getting narrower.

"Narrow," in fact, is the word I use to describe the thinking of the other parties. An influx of doctors can't affect the grassroots' job market.

The usual thinking is that the Liberal Party is politically incorrect for speaking out against parties that claim to represent the grassroots.

We have to thank the proportional representation of Legco elections – I only needed 15 percent of the votes in New Territories East to win a seat. That's what I call fair.

Say no to minimum wage - legislation would only make it even hard for the unskilled to find a job.

75 percent of Hong Kong people support setting a minimum wage in our survey, but at least about 20 percent want us to say no.

Sometimes votes are important. But if I only make decisions based on votes, why bother?

The decision to quit the Executive Council and vote against Article 23 in 2003 was the most difficult one I ever had to make ever. I dwelt on it for days. But I'm very proud of the decision.

I've made a lot of mistakes in my political career, but I don't spend time dwelling on them – people might criticize me for not being able to name any of them, when they can easily name 10.

Political wisdom is sometimes just about saying the right thing. You have to say something people want to hear.

I usually don't care much about political correctness, though. I won't starve to death if I lose my political career.

That's why I still say the wrong things once in a while.

THE PERRY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP
Nicholas Gurewitch

