

Wanted: a Truly Modern, Liberal Party
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The Liberal Party is dead. Long live the liberal party. The strategy of big business – to nurture the Liberal as the party of business interests in the era of democratic politics – lies shredded on the ballot booth floor.

In the recent Legislative Council election, the Liberal Party lost in all its geographical constituency contests and ended up with seven functional constituency seats. Of these, only four were contested. Five of the seven elected by corporate bodies rather than individuals. One of the two that are not, that of the Heung Yee Kuk, is elected by all of 157 individuals. This is a complete dead end for any party wishing to have any future in democratic politics.

With kuk chairman Lau Wong-fat having quit the party, the so-called party of the business interests is now down to six functional constituency members who have all pledged to put the interests of their functional constituencies above all other interests – a severe handicap to the creation of a party political platform. This schizophrenia – the requirement to cater to the sectoral interests of its power base in the functional constituencies on the one hand, and the need to create a broad-based platform that has mass appeal on the other – has all along been a major weakness of the Liberal Party.

For businessmen like me, this is a matter of deep concern. With the Liberal Party in disarray, we may end up with no party in Legco advocating the free-market principles that are the foundation of Hong Kong's success. One candidate after another, as the election results came through, spoke in ways that made one ask: "Wither Hong Kong's capitalist ethos? Wither Hong Kong's spirit of free enterprise?"

A clear majority of Hong Kong's electorate favours democracy. Despite the low turnout, pan-democrats still won about 60 per cent of popular vote, and there is widespread distaste for anything that smacks of privilege – as exemplified by the functional constituency system. There is a strong anti-big-business feeling, and low tolerance for situation in which a handful of leading families controls the lifeblood of the economy and uses its influence to consolidate its privileges. Pundits can argue all they like about whether this is a matter of reality or perception; the reality is that people think it's the reality. Today's young, articulate, individualistic middle-class voter has a very different world outlook from the oligarchs that control the voice of business.

To have any chance of electoral success in geographical constituencies, a pro-free-enterprises party must pay heed to all of this.

First, it must acknowledge that functional constituencies have no place in the primary legislative chamber. No party that defends the functional constituencies carries any credibility in the geographical seats, which is where the future lies. It must commit every lawmaker from a functional constituency to its eventual abolition and to a platform that, while defending sectoral interests, gives primacy to the party's political platform – and

acknowledges the duty of every lawmaker to pursue the higher interests of the community as a whole.

Second, it must be ‘pro-economy’ rather than ‘pro-business’. It must argue for the free-market principles that bring economic opportunity to every man in the street, and which are essential to the competitiveness and prosperity of Hong Kong’s economy.

Third, it must become a ‘modern’ party. It must fully adopt the rising concerns of civic society: better urban planning; a cleaner, greener environment; protection of heritage and well-loved neighbourhoods; corporate social responsibility; and acknowledgement of a responsibility to preserve our planet for future generations through the principles of sustainable development. It must be a humane party that concedes the need for social justice but holds fast to its free-market principles. Such a party does not yet exist: if it did, I would join it – and so, I suspect, would many others.
