

Hong Kong's leader said little about the environment in policy address

In her first policy address, Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor focused on “people-oriented” policies for the elderly and underprivileged, displaying the new administration’s philosophy.

Unfortunately, somewhere during the process of producing this agenda, our environment was forgotten. In the 40-minute speech, Mrs Lam devoted less than 20 seconds to the topic, only making mention of establishing a countryside conservation office. Even in the full version of the policy address, only a handful of environment-related initiatives were proposed – much of them already put forward by the previous administration.

Waste and climate change stand out as two issues that were not adequately addressed.

Although exporters have resumed waste paper collection, China’s waste import ban will come into force by the end of the year. There is also an underlying mistrust among the public over where our recyclables go. The government must build a functional recycling industry in Hong Kong that is not wholly reliant on exporting waste. It must rebuild trust through education and outreach to ensure resources are properly reused and recycled. Also, a carrot-and-stick approach is needed to incentivise the public to greatly reduce the volumes of waste produced.

As a coastal city near the equator, Hong Kong will bear the brunt of climate change. Yet, citizens appear to be largely unconcerned about this topic. Wasteful energy use is rampant. It is still considered normal to put on a coat or jersey indoors even when it is not needed outside, because air conditioners are on settings that are too cold.

The government must raise the city’s carbon reduction target to match those of other members of the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, with appropriate measures in place for us to meet the target. Natural gas is a stopgap solution. The government must work with the power companies to greatly increase the supply of renewable energy.

While it is important to buy political support as the new chief executive, Mrs Lam mustn’t miss the forest for the trees. Policies such as the air-conditioner grant for schools and the public transport fare subsidy are nice to have, but they do not address the long-term needs of the city and its citizens. If the government intends to make Hong Kong a liveable city, we need to see a more proactive stance from it.

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