

## Politicians dream the impossible

Written by Ian Inkster  
Monday, 09 January 2012 09:17

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There are quite a lot of noisy politicians in Taiwan. However, there is not so much in the way of politics. Most of our politicians seem to desperately avoid spending any time in carving out policies that might work, be accomplished in a reasonable time and within a budget that does not inflate exponentially. In this way, they avoid debate over the content and funding of specific items. Perhaps they have been led to believe that cultivating the art of the possible is somehow beneath them or an unwelcome addition to their bag of tricks.

We should be howling about this, because election day is dangerously close.

On Dec. 15, the Taipei Times editorial “asked the presidential candidates to provide solid details about their policy platforms” so that the electorate could make proper, democratic decisions about the future of the nation (“Enough mud, we want policy details,” page 8).

Nothing has happened since then. Indeed the rhetoric has escalated and centered only on China (supposed solutions of) and corruption (supposed cases of).

When Otto von Bismarck, the famous Iron Chancellor of Prussia, supposedly made his clever remark to Meyer von Waldeck about politics being the “art of the possible,” he might not have quite realized the range of meanings that could be given to his own phrase. His comment was made in the summer of 1867, at a time when Formosa (Taiwan) was being opened up by Western commercial interests and when China was to realize the island’s potential strategic value in a game played between such major “Great Powers” as Britain, France, Germany and Russia.

China found that with all its artifice and ingenuity it could not control the destiny of this small place. Of course, it still tries to do so and great powers are still involved, as witness the recent US moves, any or all of which might well have “carried political connotations” into the present presidential campaign, distorting the environment in favor of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九).

Since those 19th century days, the notion of politics as the art of the possible has normally been given only a negative connotation.

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In 2010, Mike Marqusee said whenever he heard that phrase he suspected he was being told “to accept apparent present conditions as immutable facts of life and to trim my goals accordingly. I’m being told to let injustices stand.”

More generally, Marqusee went on to conclude: “If your politics is about personal aggrandizement, then it will be ‘the art of the possible’ in the narrowest sense.”

Of course, he was saying that those who want real change and wish for radical progress in society to be exerted through democratic channels should do well to push beyond the frontiers of the possible, to refuse to listen to those self-satisfied politicians who plead “practicality” and mundane choices as the only way to survive in a complex world. Because, if you accede to this, it does indeed become impossible to remove either poverty or corruption.

We can agree with all of this from Marqusee. However, in Taiwan things are somewhat different. I would say that most leading politicians here in fact hide behind the rhetoric of an impossible problem — that of China and cross-strait issues — to disguise their failures in the realm of the politically possible. Because of this, I continue to say that democratic progress in this country requires much more attention to the possible and far less attention to dreams of directly influencing China through electoral rhetoric.

Of course, the notion of politics as the art of the possible can always be taken as cynical or blinkered or both. And of course, in its proper place debate on the meaning of political life and examination of commanding philosophies of governance and civil society is an essential element of healthy democracy. However, this is hardly my complaint.

To repeatedly allow electoral politics, especially in times of national elections, to avoid focusing on what is actually feasible and to fill newspapers, air space and social networks with the one issue of Taiwan-China relations — added to which might be a flavoring of debate on the extent and location of public corruption — is to permit the erosion of democratic politics in this country and a reduction of the potential soft power that Taiwan might come to develop on an international platform.

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I would say that when former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) said Ma was “distorting history” by lying to Taiwanese with his claim that the so-called “1992 consensus” was a decision made during Lee’s presidency, he was himself guilty of distorting politics away from the art of the possible and into the realms of useless rhetoric which effectively disarms the Taiwanese media. You see, both sides are at fault on this.

For instance, thinking of the present print media, what should be the function of the press in Taiwan? Surely the answer would acknowledge something of the value of freedom of expression, discussion and criticism as the basis upon which any informed and considered collective judgments on matters of public policy might be made?

However, if only noisy rhetoric surrounding the impossible dominates, then no art of the politically possible can be developed in our public life and through our public media. This results in second-rate politics throughout Taiwanese public life.

To take another example, a great weight of political opinion says that Taiwanese economic relations with China are now too close and potentially fatal to long-term prosperity and commercial security. It is often said that economic ties will spell political absorption. However, rather than politicians, especially those in opposition, merely jumping astride this bandwagon, could they not refine the issue into a matter of practical policies and debate the details in the public arena as a major election issue?

When exercising an “art of the possible,” realistic and responsible politicians would not merely join a stampede of rhetoric without thinking of possible responses to the dominance of the Chinese economy. It is not possible to simply reduce Chinese commercial dominance without compensating for this by public sector stimulation of trading and investing relations with Japan, the US and Europe, or without thinking of novel ways of increasing our commerce with growing economies such as India, Brazil or Indonesia, which themselves are increasingly in global competition with China.

Which major political party has announced explicit practical policies that address Chinese relations indirectly and with subtlety by stimulating a wider Taiwanese portfolio for global trade and direct investment? It is simply not within any conception of the “art of the possible” to have a policy position which damns the dominance of China without providing channels of remedial yet profitable action for Taiwanese businesspeople.

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Many similar queries concerning “the art of the possible” might be raised on a host of issues important to Taiwan — from education, housing, justice and human rights, city environs, unemployment and working conditions, to welfare or tourism. If Taiwan wishes to demonstrate over time its potential global contribution as an independent nation, then surely it must now begin to demonstrate the strength of its political culture, its openness to new ideas and peoples and its maturity as a place of discourse and freedom?

Rather than emphasizing the lack of freedom in China, why not demonstrate better the value of freedom and discourse in Taiwan? Rather than only claiming an international culture and language skills, why not encourage tourism by investing in joint public and private sector programs to ease and cheapen the costs of transport and communication, accommodation and leisure activities?

For the major political parties to continue in not doing this sort of thing is to live within a persistent and irritating conundrum. On present measures, party politics in Taiwan spends much time proclaiming the need for sovereign freedom in the face of Chinese dominance. Yet fixation on this issue at the expense of wholesome debate over a wider range of policies inhibits the growth of a vibrant civil society with aggressive public debate over matters of exceeding social and economic importance. If we focus our effort and public voice on grabbing more hard power we might well lose the modicum of global soft power that we have been gradually gaining since July 1987.

This is a catch-22 operating in the vital organs of the national polity itself. Voting for democracy requires detailed knowledge of the real political issues and their possible solution. Public debate which provides such knowledge itself demonstrates Taiwanese democracy at work. Candidates should allow each member of the public a fully democratic vote. They should do it now.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2012/01/09](#)