

## **Opinion**

*Timothy J. Peirson-Smith*

# **Carrie Lam proves she's no CY Leung clone with her first policy address**

Timothy Peirson-Smith says the chief executive made clear her plans to engage youth through her policies, and also shifted focus to local issues, rather than emphasising Beijing's plans



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Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam answers questions during a press conference after her first policy address at the Legislative Council on Wednesday. Photo: AFP

Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor's maiden policy address was an opportunity to show whether she will be a carbon copy of her predecessor, Leung Chun-ying, and whether she can really connect with the public.

Lam's vision and strategies for Hong Kong's development over the next five years were more or less the same as her election manifesto – a "Hong Kong of hope and happiness". Land and housing policy is still afforded top priority. "Starter homes" – a brand-new initiative offering affordable apartments to young families – has been rolled out as a collaboration between government and the business sector to fulfil part of her election pledges.



People line up at a sales office for COO Residence, a new residential project offering micro flats in Tuen Mun, at the Bank of America Tower in Central, last month. Housing is one of Carrie Lam's priorities. Photo: David Wong

As promised, Lam has shown her determination to connect with the youth. Her address announced several new measures, such as bringing youth into the proposed Policy Innovation and Co-ordination Unit, formerly the Central Policy Unit, and setting up a youth development commission, in an attempt to appease and lobby support from this cohort, who were less than thrilled by Lam's election.

### **Carrie Lam steers clear of politics, pledges billions on technology sector and new housing schemes**

However, the focus of her policy address differs slightly from her election manifesto. Instead of emphasising education and economic development, Lam has shifted focus to developing innovation and technology, where Hong Kong has long and rightly been criticised for lagging far behind other global cities and competitors. She has proposed several measures, such as allocating HK\$10 billion as university research funding, and establishing a chief executive's council of advisers on innovation and strategic development, aiming to promote Hong Kong as an international innovation and technology hub.

Despite the fact that both Leung and Lam both gave land and housing policy top billing in their addresses, the style and content of their speeches were wildly different. Lam tried to keep her speech as concise as possible, highlighting only key points instead of reading all paragraphs of the full address, which contained more details of her proposed policies than Leung's speeches and which would have taken Lam over three hours to read. In so doing, Lam managed to finish her summary of priorities in a mere 40 minutes, more in tune with today's and, in particular, youth's sound bite world.

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In terms of content, compared with Leung, who continuously stressed the importance of the central government and reiterated the initiatives put forward by Beijing (for example, the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), Lam wisely adopted a different approach. Though she was labelled "Beijing's choice" throughout the election campaign, she has prioritised local policy issues, and there were significantly fewer references to "Beijing" and "Belt and Road Initiative" in her speech, which may impress the public and show she is striving to improve Hong Kong instead of merely following Beijing's will.



Former chief executive Leung Chun-ying continuously stressed the importance of the central government and reiterated the initiatives put forward by Beijing during his police addresses. Photo: Sam Tsang

Lam's maiden address can be regarded as a small conclusion to what some have called her first "100 days of reform". She adopted a refreshingly new and youthful approach in introducing some new, yet popular initiatives, such as the "two-tier" profit tax system and the MTR fares subsidies. In doing so, it seems Lam's ploy to differentiate herself from Leung have been quite a success.

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Some remain sceptical about whether Lam can be trusted to fight for the best interests of Hong Kong citizens, especially in tough moments. She inherited a basket of unanswered questions from her predecessor, and there is no way her government can dodge all the issues, such as a rapidly ageing population, the radicalisation of youngsters, a dysfunctional legislature, the rapid rise of artificial intelligence and implications for future jobs, not to mention fierce regional and international competition. Thus, it is for Lam to again prove her doubters wrong, taking Hong Kong forward, both economically and socially.

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