

Transcript of remarks by CE at media session before ExCo meeting (with video)

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, at a media session before the Executive Council meeting today (May 19):

Reporter: Good morning, Mrs Lam. By insisting lawmakers urgently pass the controversial National Anthem Law, with all the ensuing chaos in the Legislature, do you feel you are repeating the exact same mistakes exactly one year on from the Extradition Bill row? You apologised last year, said you'd learned lessons after the city was brought to its knees. Should trade partners and Hongkongers be concerned that this time you are knowingly taking the city into more protests, more economic turmoil? Second, on social distancing, you said there is no politics. Under what law is it illegal to gather for a so-called common purpose during COVID-19? Police and the Justice department (the Department of Justice) claim it's unlawful, with those gathering at malls to chant slogans punished, but expats in SoHo are mostly left alone. Has the right to protest been suspended? What guidelines mention common purpose? And finally, critics say this exam question is a matter of critical thinking. Was it actually written by an EDB staffer? And is it appropriate to, you know, quote a freedom fighter in Nelson Mandela when you appear to be advocating a crackdown on education and censorship?

Chief Executive: I'm sorry that in most of your questions you have presented a very biased and prejudiced position, and your choice of words is not something that I would accept. But that's not for argument now. My purpose standing here is to provide information and the Government's response as comprehensively as possible because I attach a lot of importance to press reporting and one of my priorities since taking office is to facilitate the work of reporters including welcoming Hong Kong Free Press, which I understand is online news only, to join this sort of gathering.

Now the three questions. One is, it is entirely incorrect to say that we are planning to urgently pass the National Anthem Bill. The National Anthem Bill went through its proper process in the Legislative Council and was completed in May last year, a year ago. It has completed the scrutiny by a Bills Committee chaired by the Honourable Martin Liao with a lot of meetings, public hearings and so on. It has completed the process of presenting the report of the Bills Committee compiled by the Secretariat, not by us, by the Secretariat of the Legislative Council, back to the then-House Committee. It only left for us to do a final step under the Rules of Procedure, that is to consult the House Committee Chairman on the exact date to go back to the Legislative Council for the resumption of Second Reading. But unfortunately since October last year we have wasted a full seven months without a House Committee Chairman for us to consult with. Last Friday, they have done

something which made it possible for us to continue to consult the then-existing Chairman of the House Committee, the Honourable Starry Lee, and after yesterday's election we now have a House Committee Chairwoman installed. The timetable for presenting the Bills Committee Report and also for the resumption of Second Reading of a National Anthem Bill will go forward on next Wednesday, because this is the first priority bill in terms of the chronology of events. So there isn't even a subjective assessment. It is just in accordance with the chronology of events because it has completed its scrutiny a year ago, whereas other bills ready for resumption of Second Reading were only completed much later. I don't understand why, for doing such a proper thing, that the administration needs to apologise.

The second point is, you said that there will be concern by the trading partners. I don't know where is the source of your information, but as far as we can gather, because we have been meeting chambers of business on a very regular basis, including the consular community on a regular basis, their major concern now is, one, the economy. The economy is now in very dire situation, not only in Hong Kong but also globally. Their concern is on Hong Kong's law and order, on security. And that's the reason why we have lost some marks in the Heritage Foundation's latest assessment, because of the investment freedoms and security aspects, that people might not feel very safe in investing in Hong Kong because of the violent scenes that they have seen caused by the rioters. That's my second response.

As far as the social distancing, the legal basis comes from Regulation 599G under the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance. In every regime, when you are faced with a very major public health crisis, all the governments need that sort of measures. We are already less severe because we never imposed a complete city lockdown. We never prohibit people from leaving their home. One of these measures that we have imposed is to prohibit group gatherings of a certain size because large crowd make it very easy to transmit infectious disease. That's the basis of the social distancing measures as far as prohibiting group gatherings is concerned.

I don't know what your final question is, but I thought I am at liberty to quote distinguished people in impressing upon people of Hong Kong how much importance we attach to education, because if education is done wrongly, its damages and severe consequences are really beyond imagination. So I would appeal to all stakeholders in Hong Kong to help preserve the value of education in Hong Kong for the sake of our younger generation. Thank you very much.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the transcript.)