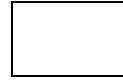


2003.4.30

**Speech by the Hon Howard Young, JP  
Motion Debate on The Whole Community Battling  
Against Adversity, 30 April 2003**



Howard Young:

Madam President, first of all, I would like to express my highest respect to people in the medical sector who have committed themselves to studying on tackling atypical pneumonia and the front-line medical and health care personnel in Hong Kong, particularly Mr LAU Wing-kai, a nursing officer who unfortunately died last week because of contracting the disease while taking care of patients.

Mr LAU's act has precisely reflected front-line workers' demonstration of their fearless sense of duty in the face of the deadly virus in taking care of each and every patient round the clock devotedly. They merit once again our heartfelt gratitude. I was most moved by Mr LAU's widow, who has not forgotten to, even in great grief, say words of encouragement to the colleagues of her and her late husband to remind them not to lose heart. She has fully demonstrated a most respectable virtue.

Equipment for the front-line warriors is crucial to winning the battle against atypical pneumonia. In order to win this epidemic of the century, I hope the Government can do whatever it can to provide front-line medical workers with adequate protective gear, enhance their protection against further infection and avoid dampening their morale.

As atypical pneumonia is a new virus, the medical sector was short of means against it initially and the number of infections rose at one point swiftly, leaving the public and tourists in a great panic. Consequently, overseas tourists stopped coming to Hong Kong, and the public dared not venture out and spend. Four major industries, namely tourism, catering, retail and entertainment, were hard hit, and their businesses dropped drastically. Meanwhile, a travel advisory was issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) against Hong Kong. Being one of the major economic pillars of Hong Kong, tourism suffered a severe blow. As a great number of tourists decided to seek a refund or postpone their trips, the turnover of travel agencies fell more than 80%, hotel occupancy dropped to less than 10%, and air passenger throughout fell more than 70%. Initially, the industry still harboured some hope for the golden week starting from 1 May. Its hope was completely dashed following the Mainland's announcement of abolishing the 1 May long holiday. Not only was inbound tourism affected, outbound tourism was harmed as well. Following the imposition of respective travel

restrictions on Hong Kong travellers by Thailand, Malaysia and Taiwan, the entire industry was plunged into an unprecedented difficult situation.

As businesses were extremely bad, many operators who could not sustain any longer chose to wind up their businesses. In a bid to rescue themselves and save expenditure, enterprises were one after another forced to ask some of their staff to accept pay cuts or take turns in taking annual leave or unpaid leave. Some enterprises even opted to suspend business. Under the current economic situation, some fortunate employees are still given partial payment of wages. Those who are not so fortunate can only live on their own savings. Let me quote the industry to which I belong as an example. The incomes of outbound tour leaders and inbound tour guides come mainly from tips from tourists. The meagre number of tours has made it difficult for them to support their living.

Mr James TIEN, Chairman of the Liberal Party, made the point that the \$17 million raised under the "Business Community Relief Fund for Victims of SARS" launched by him should be able to offer some measure of assistance to the family members of those who are directly affected or killed by atypical pneumonia. What about other people in Hong Kong? What can be done to help them?

I do agree that stimulating spending provides a way out to all industries, whether hard hit or not. This is also the theme of the "We Love Hong Kong Campaign" launched by the Tourism Coalition of Hong Kong this week for the purpose of encouraging people to spend. However, money is needed before we can spend, how can we go spending without money? Although a salary tax rebate proposal was announced by the Government as part of its initiatives to save the market last week, the amount of tax rebate is subject to a ceiling of \$3,000 and will not be released until August. When it comes to stimulating spending, I share Mr CHAN Kwok-keung's view that this is fundamental to the rescue attempt. However, my view is somewhat different when it comes to the Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) schemes. I support the temporary suspension of MPF contribution, as this will relieve some of the pressure on employers and give employees more money to spend. It is even possible that an additional liquidity of between \$10 billion and \$20 billion will be made available for spending in the market. I believe this will have a positive effect on reviving the economy. Now that Hong Kong economy is like a pool of stagnant water. Taking self-salvation measures is the only way to extricate Hong Kong from this predicament. At the same time, we should encourage more people to go out for shopping and dining, watching movies and travelling. Tourism encompasses both inbound and outbound travels, which are essentially the same in the sense that they constitute some kind of spending. However, tourism can in turn stimulate Hong Kong economy, provide impetus to other industries, boost job opportunities, and prevent the economy from remaining stagnant. I hereby call on Honourable

Members and other members of the community to take the lead to spend in the month of May, turning the lost golden week into a month for self-salvation.

Madam President, as Hong Kong and the Mainland are interdependent, we greatly support co-operation between China and Hong Kong in battling against atypical pneumonia. We are pleased to see that the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has responded swiftly to the assistance offered by the Shenzhen Municipal Government in installing additional mainland-produced infrared temperature monitors at sea, land and air control points in a bid to boost the confidence of the international community in our quarantine and epidemic-battling efforts, and enable our community to expeditiously regain its vitality and resume our life and order to normal.

Madam President, I so submit.