



## Towards the 21st Century

**Dr. Chira Hongladarom, Executive Director, Human Resources Institute, Thammasat University.**

I must open my column this week by offering my congratulations to Khun Chuan Leekpai and the Government on the landmark occasion of achieving two full years in office. A number of recent public opinion polls indicate that many segments of Thai society are relatively happy with Khun Chuan's performance and especially, since we live in an era of developing democracy, it is heartening to see some kind of stability in our political system. Looking ahead to the 21st century we cannot over estimate the importance of having leaders equipped with the vision and capability to carry us into the future.

The benefits our country derives from political stability are very important ones. In my opinion they can be broken down into at least two main features. Firstly, a government which lasts more than 2 years has begun to acquire the respect of both the bureaucracy and the citizens. Secondly, after two years they have also acquired a reasonable amount of the knowledge and experience necessary for administering the country effectively.

Probably the second advantage of longevity is more important because it also means that there will be more capable candidates to choose from whenever the next general election is called. I know that politics is not really a profession in Thailand, but at least it is nice to dream about having well qualified people contesting for political office next time around.

Meanwhile high achieving individuals currently engaged in other walks of life who may feel they have something to offer the people of Thailand should certainly also consider throwing their hats into the political arena. This way our political culture will benefit from a greater diversity of experience and acquire a more professional approach all-round.

To me politics is not just about winning elections; it is more about improving the lot of our society. Perhaps politicians should start to improve their image by improving the images of their parties. In the future I would like to see political parties acting as centers of knowledge that is offered in the service of the majority of the people.

Turning to other matters, last week I was primarily busy with two things I would like to share with you. On Monday I was very honoured to be the guest speaker at a meeting of the provincial representatives of the Department of Employment (DOE) of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare in Had Yai.

Perhaps this is the first time some of you have heard about this organisation as it is quite new. The new department has been assigned a number of human resources tasks including approving and issuing foreigner work permits. The Director-General of the DOE has now decentralised responsibility for granting work permits to provincial level. For example all the foreign experts and engineers working for oil companies around Songkha no longer need to go to Bangkok for approval of their work permit applications. They can do it all right there in Songkha.

In addition these provincial DOE offices have also been given responsibility for processing the export of Thai labour for overseas. As most people realise, Thailand has substantially benefited from foreign exchange earnings derived from labour 'exports'. The current trend is towards meeting shortages of higher qualified labour in such countries as Taiwan and Japan, but here the problem is that with our own indigenous shortages of labour, the policy has to be regularly reviewed to see if we can still spare them. There are even those who think that we should immediately cease all exports of labour.

Last but not least the DOE is also tasked with promoting maximum employment for our totally 33 million-strong labour force.

As you may know in several other countries including Australia and Britain the job of promoting employment is accorded ministerial level importance. However, my impression of the human resources which have been allocated to fulfilling the DOE's provincial level responsibilities is that they will need to invest heavily in training. I believe it is important for these staff to understand about data collection as a tool for identifying and acting upon changes in the employment pattern.

The main problem with the labour market revolves around the supply and demand mismatch. While the private sector is responsible for the demand side, the poor public sector is left to generate the supply. Therefore it gives me much pleasure to inform the readers of HRI/Post Cooperation that the DOE and the HRI of Thammasat University will jointly organise intensive training courses on Labour Economics for senior DOE officials. We hope that they will thereby become thoroughly equipped to deal with the challenges that lay before them, and if any of our readers see a way to help us develop this kind of partnership and understand its importance, you are welcome to participate.

The other big event for the HRI last week was welcoming a 4 member Chinese delegation from the State Planning Commission lead by Professor Yu Xiaodong. The delegation was visiting under the sponsorship of the LINEPA with the HRI arranging a study tour. As we have mentioned previously the HRI is very actively involved in disseminating information to officials from Indochinese countries on a train and exchange basis. The relationship we have with China is one of the most crucial.

I noted that the Chinese delegation paid particular attention to the role of the female labour force in their on-going economic transition. Of course the Thai experience in this regard is extremely useful to them as they can learn from both its successes and failures. I sincerely hope the HRI can expand this training relationship with the Chinese to cover more officials especially in view of the likelihood of their becoming an economic giant in the next century.

Finally, let me give a warm welcome to our guest columnist Dr. Kriengsak Chantornwong. With his experience as teacher, consultant and entrepreneurial brains behind 'bookstore' we can say that Dr. Kriengsak is one of Thailand's renaissance men.

Personally I always welcome the exposure to a greater variety of reading materials when I travel overseas, whereas I find the selection in most local bookstores rather limited. Parents reading Dr. Kriengsak's article should note the incredible importance of reading to their children's education, especially in view of the fact that the climate in most of our educational institutions tends not to require students to think much for themselves or question what they learn.

I hate to say it but the first group of people who need to read more are in fact our teachers. Now there's something to think about!

See you next week!

### Occupation of the opinion leaders in the opinion leader survey, Japan 1993

