

BRAIN DRAIN

(Chairman: Dr. Gwee Ah Leng)

Brain Drain

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Brain drain is not a new problem, for as early as the Warring Kingdoms, 200–400 B.C. there was reference to able men of one kingdom being employed by another. One of the famous cases was a man from Cho who was unable to please the Lord of Cho enough to get employment. His friend spoke to the Lord several times on his behalf without success, and finally in exasperation, he said to Lord of Cho: “My Lord, if you are not going to utilise this man’s ability, please kill him before he serves our enemies.” The Lord of Cho did not accept the advice. In fact, he was a bit surprised at the advice, because these two men were excellent friends. Subsequently, he made his way to Chin, and helped Chin to wrest military leadership from Cho. Hence the famous saying 楚材晋用 – The talents of Cho utilised by Chin!

We can see that there is the realisation that a man of talent is of value to a country, and his leaving the country would be a loss. The loss, it maybe granted, is not tangible in terms of foreign exchange or other material possessions, but it is one that can be equally, if not more, devastating.

Now, a nation is rich and strong if it has an abundance of material and human ability. The possession of oil, grain, minerals and arable land is a sine – qua – non for a mighty nation, for in history, no nation has become mighty without. Those that are naturally endowed can become mighty in their own right, but those that are not so lucky nevertheless can make good by plunder, annexations, and other means.

Similarly, wealth without talents are insufficient to bring about success, for without human power to utilise wealth, possession of material abundance only leads to the danger of being plundered and subjugated, and history in the last 300 years has been a record of colonial plunders by western nations of wealth in the other countries.

Hence, wealth does not invariably spell strength, and the key to the difference is the degree and efficiency of utilisation. The wealth of India alone has contributed a large measure to make the British Empire a mightier one than Rome at one time, but that same wealth did not and still has not transformed India from a poverty-stricken developing nation to a modern power. Likewise, human power is essential for the growth of a nation towards success, but unless exploited, it is of little value.

Hence, in the world, there are nations who have the prerequisite conditions for success – natural resources and manpower, and they are expectedly successful. At the same time, there are also nations with similar prerequisite conditions; but they are “developing” at best. What is even more interesting is that some nations are deficient in one or both of these conditions, and they are nevertheless successful.

To do so they would have to depend on resource-material exploitation, and brain drain to make up their deficits.

It can be seen that brain drain in fact is ancient in history, and is a natural consequence of inability to utilise, or competitive inducement. Why is it we

are now so much obsessed with it that in fact we are discussing it even today in a meeting of medical people?

One of the reasons, I feel sure, is that in the post-war years, many Governments have become susceptible to public opinion, because of the improvement in the level of general education, so that the public has become more critical and sophisticated. Another equally important reason would seem to be that many Governments made promises too readily of social and personal advancement, and their subsequent failure to deliver the goods forced them to look for a reason, and brain drain is a very credible excuse. After all, if the able nationals were unwilling to stay back and do their bit, what can one expect the statesman to be able to achieve?

Thus, in developing nations particularly, and in countries where things are not going on so well, such as the Health Services in Britain, there is a loud and insistent cry of brain drain, and some blame their own nationals for materialistic outlook and lack of loyalty, and others accuse the benefitting nations of unprincipled poaching and even economic and manpower sabotage. Some introduce punitive measures to prevent emigration such as tightening of exit visas, prohibition of transference of money and personal belongings whereas some nations are coerced to introduce quotas of admission, and insist on repatriation of personnel after training by prohibiting them from taking up gainful employment in the countries benefitting from the alleged drain.

What actually is the brain drain? Logically, the distribution of "brain" ability in a population is much the same the world over, and in any population, at least 25% to 30% can be trained beyond secondary level, constituting the brain reservoir. Full utilisation would mean all these will have the opportunity to train and openings to occupy. Under-utilisation would be a brain wastage, at times as serious, if not more than brain drain. In Singapore there are 60,000 students at school entry. Half gets weeded out at primary, 80% gets weeded at Form 4 and 50% gets weeded out at H.S.C. leaving us a brain utilisation figure of 5% only!

On the other hand, the brain drain, though much played up, is a smaller problem in terms of numbers, other than some exceptional situations like

doctors in Ireland and post-graduate research scholars from Taiwan and Philippines. Even in the two last instances, when one considers the actual number involved in terms of total manpower, the problem is barely significant.

Nevertheless, a good deal of attention has been directed to this group, and broadly one many say that the reasons generally accepted for brain drain are as follows:—

1. Lack of opportunity at home.
2. Lack of suitable facilities at home.
3. Better employment conditions elsewhere.
4. Personal factors.

It must be obvious that to train someone in a highly developed country and then to have him back at work in undeveloped rural areas is squandering idiocy at its best, for here one is literally spending resources to create frustrated brain power! Yet, this has been done again and again, even up till today.

In a competitive world, one cannot prevent out-bidding, and if anyone happens to have a very outstanding person about, chances are this person will be induced by many means to go elsewhere. Happily, extraordinary men of genius are few, and they would not really count in the reckoning of total manpower in terms of numbers.

My belief is that in the matter of brain drain, personal factors play the most important part. Incompatibility, lack of dedication, administrative bias, improper utilisation are some of the things that cause rancour and dissatisfaction, and result in brain drain when the opportunity is ripe. Basically, it takes a brain to recognise another. Incompetent statesmen will not be able to utilise able personnel, and one can gauge the ability of the Government by the calibre of the people it employs.

In summary, I like to submit that the problem of brain drain though spectacular and common is insignificant compared to brain wastage, and attention to develop brain potentials by training and education is far more important than concern over brain drain. In brain drain, however the problems are several but the biggest one is that of the incompetence of the employer, who is unable to utilise a good man properly because he is not good enough to identify him.