

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam apologises for confusion after dismissing English question

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Chief Executive Carrie Lam has apologised for any confusion after stating on Tuesday that answering an English question was a waste of time. Lam said she has no intention of changing the format of media sessions.

Speaking to the press before a routine Executive Council meeting, Lam was asked in Cantonese about earlier remarks on land supply. An RTHK reporter then asked another question in English on the same topic. Lam responded by saying that simultaneous interpretation should be offered at media events to avoid repetition and time-wasting.

Chinese and English are both official languages under the city's Basic Law.

In a press release late Tuesday, Lam said: "If reporters ask the same question in different languages (be it Cantonese, Putonghua or English), and the same reply given also in different languages, that would take up time that might otherwise be used for reporters to raise other questions of interest. Those remarks were not targeted at the English language."

"I have no intention to change the way these pre-ExCo meeting media sessions are to be conducted. I apologise for any confusion thus caused."

Lam said she would continue answering questions in the language they are raised – either Cantonese, Putonghua or English: "There is no question of the Government or myself attaching less importance to the use of English."



Carrie Lam. Photo: Tom Grundy/HKFP.

‘An international city’

Earlier on Tuesday, the Hong Kong Journalists Association said that Hong Kong is an international city, with English as an official language: “English media and English media reports are an important medium that helps the international community understand Hong Kong. Mrs Lam’s dismissive attitude towards media questions raised in English is totally unacceptable.”

The press freedom watchdog added: “We reiterated that there is practical need for English media and reporters whose major language is English to raise questions in English. It is absolutely not a question of waste of time. Like other Chinese media, they shoulder the responsibility of monitoring the Government by reporting the truth.”

Former lawmaker Emily Lau also said told [RTHK](#) that Hong Kong was an international city: “It is totally inappropriate, it’s insane, and it’s outrageous – especially when Hong Kong wants to be Asia’s world city and our language policy is biliterate and trilingual. So all government officials, including the Chief Executive and of course legislators and Executive Council members, they should answer questions in the language that is asked.”



‘Cultural diversity’

According to [government statistics](#), 89.1 per cent of the population speak Cantonese as a first language, while 4.1 per cent speak English, 3.15 per cent speak other Chinese dialects and 1.85 per cent speak Putonghua. According to the 2016 census, 59.1 per cent of Hongkongers can speak English.

NGO Hong Kong Unison also said that Lam’s reaction was at odds with the government’s policies to provide equal access to public services and information.

It said in a statement on Tuesday: “The right to information for ethnic minorities is as important as that for Chinese in Hong Kong. Remarks such as “answering in English is a waste of time” is insulting to the ethnic and linguistic minorities and clearly contradicts government’s policies to promote cultural diversity.”



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