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From: pauline_ling
Date: 2006/11/28 Tue PM 02:32:47 CST

To:

CC:

Subject: AGIO's Submission for Consultation Document on Further
Development of the Political Appointment System

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Dear SCA, SCS, PSHA and DIS,

Kindly note that the Association of Government Information Officers (AGIO) has made a submission to the Constitutional Affairs Bureau and the Civil Service Bureau today on the Consultation Document on the Further Development of the Political Appointment System.

Our views and recommendations focus on the role of the Press Secretaries. Our submission has been put up after wide consultation with the Grade and endorsed unanimously by the Executive Committee of the AGIO. It represents the mainstream views.

Attached herewith is a soft copy of our submission for your easy reference. We look forward to a response from the Administration and will be pleased to examine the issue further with the Government.

(See attached file: Letter - 28.11.2006.doc)(See attached file: Press Secy 28.11.2006.doc)

Thank you.

2006/11/28

Yours Sincerely,

Pauline Ling (Mrs)
Chairman,
Association of Government Information Officers.

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**Association of Government
Information Officers (AGIO)**

**Views on Consultation Document
On Further Development of the
Political Appointment System**

November 2006



政府新聞主任協會
The Association of Government Information Officers

c/o Information Services Department, 5/F., Murray Building, Garden Road, H.K.

Tel: 3110 2722
Fax: 3110 2700

28 November, 2006

To: Constitutional Affairs Bureau,
Civil Service Bureau.

Dear Sir,

AGIO's Submission for Consultation Document on
Further Development of the Political Appointment System

In response to the Administration's consultation exercise on Further Development of the Political Appointment System, the Association of Government Information Officers (AGIO) has widely collected views of the Information Officer Grade and would like to submit them to the Government for consideration.

The Consultation Document only covers marginally its position on the Press Secretary. Being one of the three key members at the present Principal Official Office and with the acknowledgement in the Consultation Document on the need for effective public communication and media relations, we think that the role, function, core values and operation of the Press Secretary should be examined in greater light. Our aim is to provide the best support for a people-based governance, in the interest of Hong Kong.

We hope that our views will be carefully considered. We look forward to a response from the Government and will be pleased to discuss further with the Administration.

Thank you.

Yours Sincerely,
(Signed)

Pauline Ling (Mrs)
Chairman,

Association of the Government Information Officers

Distribution

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Civil Service Bureau

Secretary for Constitutional Affairs

Secretary for the Civil Service

Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs

Director of Information Services

Views on Consultation Document
On Further Development of the Political Appointment System

Association of Government Information Officers (AGIO)

General Comments

The Association of Government Information Officers (AGIO) supports the Consultation Document in regards to enhancing the Accountability System. There is a pressing need to strengthen support for the Principal Officials (PO). In our view, the present setup for the Principal Official Offices (POO) is too lean.

AGIO's concerns focus on the role of Press Secretaries, who are at present one of the three key staff in the POO, along with the Administrative Assistant (AA) and the PO him/herself.

It is a great disappointment to the AGIO that the role and functions of Press Secretaries have not been studied or reviewed in the Consultation Document.

The Consultation Document provides a strong argument supporting the importance of maintaining a politically neutral civil service as our political system evolves. It states that :

- The AA posts continue to come under the civil service stream, with post holders required to adhere to the principle of political neutrality; and
- All AA positions to be filled by civil servants on posting.

While supporting this argument, the AGIO is disappointed that, without giving reasons or consulting the Information Officer (IO) Grade or departmental management, the Constitutional Affairs Bureau (CAB) arrived at the view that:

- Press Secretaries can continue to be filled by civil servants on posting, or by recruitment from outside by direct recruitment.

More than four years after the introduction of the Accountability System, the Information Officer Grade cannot accept this ongoing ambiguity. Such an approach creates a grey area in terms of the role and function of Press Secretaries and the

political neutrality of Information Officers. In addition, it creates uncertainty within the grade in terms of career development opportunities and will make manpower planning for the department very difficult as the system progresses.

The AGIO believes that these fundamental issues need to be addressed to ensure that the political neutrality of civil servants applies equally to all.

Subsequent to the publication of the Consultation Document, representatives of the Constitutional Affairs Bureau and the Civil Service Bureau clarified at a meeting on 7 November 2006 with the Information Officer Grade that:

- The Administration considers that Press Secretaries are and should remain politically neutral.

It is against this background that the AGIO has put forward this submission.

The Importance of Media Relations and Public Relations to a PO

We agree with the Chief Executive that there is a pressing need for POs to undertake growing political work related to the formulation and implementation of policies, to reach out to the community in a pro-active manner, and to broaden and consolidate public support for the Government.

To effect people-based governance, POs need to formulate policies conducive to social harmony and acceptable to most people.

During the process of policy formulation, it is important to gauge the views of society and various vested interest groups. Similarly, it is important to explain clearly to the public the rationale behind the introduction and implementation of certain policies, or the reason why the government has taken certain decisions. POs must be highly sensitive to public opinion and respond quickly to public concerns as and when they arise.

In this regard, POs need to ensure effective communication with the public through the media and other public relations work. As we move towards a more transparent, responsive and open government, this task of effective communication is all the more important given the background that Hong Kong has a free, highly professional, demanding and analytical media.

As the political accountability system develops, the role and function of a Press Secretary will become more important. Managing the public relations (PR) and conducting effective communication is, in fact, one of the vital elements to ensure the success of the system.

The AGIO believes that the present, three-person setup in the POO is far too lean to carry out all these duties. Enhanced public communication requires proper support. POs should have access to a team of professional media relations and PR staff to meet the challenge of an increased political workload. The Information Services Department (ISD) has a well-entrenched system and a pool of experienced staff to provide this support.

ISD has currently been providing 11 Chief Information Officers to take up the posts of Press Secretary to the POs, but this level of resources is insufficient to meet with the challenges ahead and this arrangement has put insurmountable stress on the manpower resources of the department in providing its services to other client government departments, bureaux and to the media.

Press Secretaries to be Politically Neutral Civil Servants

At the moment, 11 of the 12 Press Secretary posts in POO (including that of Secretary for Justice) are held by Information Grade Officers who are career civil servants. Based on the Administration's clarification that the Press Secretaries should maintain political neutrality, the AGIO considers that it is therefore logical for these posts to be filled ONLY by civil servants, as in the case with the AAs.

There are merits to having politically neutral civil servants as Press Secretaries. Their experiences in handling public communication and managing PR crises are valuable assets to good governance. Backed by an IO grade with its extensive network within the Government, the Press Secretaries who have served in different areas of the government PR machinery and policy bureaux, can ensure that POs are provided with professional, honest and impartial assessment of public reactions and PR advice. This, we believe, is important to the successful implementation of government policies and in ensuring social harmony.

On the other hand, the POs will be getting more support in political work from talents outside the government through the introduction of the new Deputy Directors of Bureau and new Assistants to Directors of Bureau. One of the tasks of the new

Deputy Director of Bureau will be to maintain close contact with the media. This will free up the Press Secretary to concentrate on mainstream media relations, media strategy and development of tailor-made PR programmes for various policy initiatives.

Hence, to tie in with the design of the proposed system and in keeping with the principle of maintaining a permanent, professional, meritocratic, honest and politically neutral civil service, the AGIO believes that:

- Press Secretary posts should continue to come under the civil service stream, and post holders be required to adhere to the principle of political neutrality; and
- All Press Secretary posts be filled ONLY by civil servants on posting.

This is the same principle by which AA posts are to be filled by politically neutral, civil servant AOs.

We understand that despite political neutrality, Press Secretaries have to continue to engage in political work. The Consultation Document stated clearly that the concept of a politically impartial civil service does not mean that civil servants do not or should not engage in political work. It said: "Certain political work (for example, explaining policies decided by the Government of the day to political parties and the media, and helping to secure the support of the community and the Legislative Council on government policies) is being, and should continue to be, undertaken by civil servants in support of the Principal Officials, as this work is not in conflict with the politically impartial role of civil servants." This will apply to all civil servants, AOs and IOs alike.

We also believe that as the political system evolves in future, the role and functions of civil servants at POOs, including AOs and IOs, may have to be continually reviewed and examined to meet with the changing requirements of the political system. The AGIO will keep an open mind on all suggestions and is prepared to discuss with the Administration as and when new proposals are made.

Implications of Mixed Mode on Grade Management and Morale

The AGIO strongly objects to the proposal of a mixed mode for filling of Press Secretary posts by civil servants on posting, or by recruitment from outside by direct recruitment.

With 11 Press Secretary posts at Chief Information Officer level that can be filled by either Information Grade Officers or outside appointees, the arrangement makes it very difficult for effective manpower planning.

This uncertainty for Information Officers and the government's PR machinery has the potential to greatly affect grade management, staff deployment, promotion prospects and staff morale. In addition, it has ramifications for manpower deployment across the entire civil service.

The Information Services Department cannot plan properly if, from one year to the next, there is to be a 'floating' balance of Information Officers required to carry out media relations and PR work for POs. Every time a new administration is sworn in, the department will not know what resources are required, or what resources it will have at its disposal to meet the PR and media relations needs of the POs and their offices.

Such an ad hoc approach will have a flow-on effect to the staffing levels of the Secretariat Press Offices and various Departmental Units. This in turn would affect the efficiency of PR and media relations work across the whole government.

From a staff morale point of view, such uncertainty would undoubtedly affect the department's ability to retain talented and dedicated staff over the medium to long term.

This fraying of the Information Officer structure, and its implications on manpower planning, is a great concern to the AGIO and should be a great concern to the Civil Service Bureau and the government as a whole.

Resource Implications

In view of the importance of PR work to the PO, we are of the view that sufficient resources should be given to the PR machinery. The rank of Press Secretary should be

pitched at the appropriate level to enable the post holder to carry out his/her job efficiently and effectively. Sufficient support should also be given to the Press Secretary who is at present working on a one-person basis.

On general resources, the AGIO deeply regrets that no additional resources were provided to the IO Grade to support the Political Accountability System introduced in 2002 when a new political tier with 11 new ministers were appointed. This impacted greatly on the establishment of other ISD PR units. As a result, a number of departmental PR units, Secretariat Press Offices (SPO) in particular, were trimmed, regrouped and combined to provide support for the system, placing an enormous stress to the already over-stretched government PR machinery.

We ask for the provision of staff that the Grade has been deprived of in the past few years. With the expansion of the POOs and proposed addition of new Deputy Directors of Bureau and new Assistants to Directors of Bureau, the current one-person Press Secretary will need supporting IO Grade staff to help cope with the additional workload properly and effectively.

Under the principles of people-based and transparent government, and in the spirit of developing a proper work-life balance, we believe that adequate resources should be made available to various units of the government PR machinery to support the dissemination of information to the public as well as an increasingly demanding and analytical media.

The AGIO is of the firm view that any additional resources needed to further develop the Political Appointment System as proposed by the Consultation Document should not be at the expenses of the existing civil service establishment and, in particular, the Information Services Department. We ask the Administration to reconfirm its commitment to the Grade in 2002 that the filling of Press Secretary posts by someone from outside, where necessary, will not take up resources of the ISD.

As regards the posts of Press Secretary, currently the responsibility of the one-person Press Secretary includes providing PR advice, assessing public reactions, handling all media enquiries, media relations, PR jobs locally and overseas, formulating PR strategy and co-ordinating lines-to-take at various levels etc. This has placed a tremendous and unsustainable strain on these staff who are at present pitched at Chief Information Officer level, the equivalent rank of a Senior Administrative Officer or a Chief Executive Officer.

To enable the effective execution of their work in liaising internally with POs, Permanent Secretaries, Deputy Secretaries, Heads of Department and in explaining policy rationale to senior members of the media, the AGIO believes there is a strong case to upgrade the rank of Press Secretary to D1 level to better reflect their job nature and responsibilities.

We believe that the posts of Press Secretary should be upgraded due to his/her much wider scope of work, heavier responsibility, higher level of PR advice and co-ordination required, as compared with a PR Unit Head in the government PR machinery. In many cases, the Press Secretary also acts as 'Information Co-ordinator' in the group of bureau and departments under the purview of the PO. Currently the Heads of SPOs and Department Information and PR Units are also ranked at Chief Information Officer level. We believe that they should remain so.

In addition, a Press Secretary has to face the greater challenge and pressure of the 'accountability' element of the POO, comparable to none in the government PR machinery and the private sector. The political accountability system calls for prompt PR assessment and quick response, especially at times of crisis. All this can only be handled by experienced PR professionals who usually have more than 20 years of service in this field.

The AGIO believes that setting the rank of Press Secretary at D1 level will give due recognition to the job, facilitate the smooth operation of Press Secretary, rationalise the line of command in the PR machinery and help retain the right calibre of experienced PR professionals which is also very much in demand in the private sector.

It is noteworthy that the two Press Secretaries to the Chief Secretary and the Financial Secretary are D2 level. Upgrading the Press Secretary posts to D1 will require fewer resources than creating 11 new D1 posts.

Relations between the Different Units of the PR Machinery

The introduction of the Accountability System in 2002 created a new working pattern for the Administration and civil servants. This has impacted on the line of command, PR directive and execution of PR plans of the government's PR machinery.

The AGIO believes that the Director of Information Services should take the

opportunity to review the responsibilities, work, support and line of command of the various PR units so the Government PR machinery can provide the best services to the POs, Permanent Secretaries, Directors of Departments and the media.

Recommendations

Following is a summary of views and recommendations of the AGIO on the proposals of the Consultation Document:-

- (1) We support the further development of the Political Appointment System and wholeheartedly pledge to meet the demands of POs for PR and media relations advice and services.
- (2) As is the case with the AA posts, we strongly request that:
 - (a) Press Secretary posts should continue to come under the civil service stream, and that post holders be required to adhere to the principle of political neutrality, and;
 - (b) All Press Secretary posts be ONLY filled by civil servants on posting.

We recommend that POs be given sufficient support to handle PR and media relations to meet with the challenge of the Accountability System. In keeping with the principles of people-based governance, transparency and openness, PR and media relations work should be greatly enhanced. The government PR machinery and the Press Secretaries should be given the appropriate support in resources.

Conclusion

The Information Officer Grade has always been a dedicated and loyal supporter of the Government's work and loyal to the Government of the day. We have always strived to provide PR services of the highest professional standard, and to project an accurate and positive image of Hong Kong at home and abroad. This will not change.

By acting as a bridge between the Government and the public through the mass media, Information Officers endeavour to publicise and promote the policy, work and services of the Government. We value accuracy, accessibility, openness, objectivity, promptness, professionalism and impartiality.

We hope that our views and recommendations will help facilitate the smooth and better operation of the Political Accountability System. We look forward to a response from the Administration and will be pleased to examine the issue further with the Government.

The Association of the Government Information Officers

November 28, 2006