



立法會 LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

陳智思議員 Honourable Bernard C. Chan

28 September 2006

Constitutional Affairs Bureau,
3/F Main Wing,
Central Government Offices,
Lower Albert Road,
Hong Kong

Dear Sirs,

**Views on Further Development of
the Political Appointment System**

The government released the "Consultation Document on Further Development of the Political Appointment System" in July. I hereby submit my article about the topic. The article, titled "Embracing our political future", was published in the South China Morning Post's opinion page, on September 15, 2006.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed)

Bernard Chan
Legislative Council member

Encl.

SCMP
Political Appointments
15 Sep 2006

Last July, the government released proposals on the further development of the political appointment system. Since former chief executive Tung Chee-hwa established the accountability system in 2002, all bureau heads or 'ministers' have not been civil servants (though some used to be). The question now is whether we should set up new deputy and assistant posts below them on the same basis.

To me, the idea has far more pros than cons. Although Mr Tung's measure was criticized at first, we now take it for granted that people at the top level of government should not be part of the civil service. It allows the chief executive to choose policymakers that suit his needs and preferences, it gives him a bigger pool of talent to choose from, and it helps keep the civil service politically neutral. This is the sort of system we need as Hong Kong moves towards a more democratic political structure, so developing it makes sense.

Expanding the number of political appointees would also give more help to existing ministers. Of course, they have very able civil servants to assist them in much of their work. But as Hong Kong becomes more political, they need back up from colleagues who are fellow politicians who can, for example, get involved in party or electoral issues.

Another argument in favour of the proposal is that it would open up more opportunities for people to develop their political skills. This might not be a reason on its own to establish new posts, but it would be a desirable side effect. People who say Hong Kong has a shortage of political talent are probably wrong – it's just that the talent doesn't come forward. Having more politically appointed posts would probably get more people thinking of politics as a career.

The initial public reaction to this proposal centred on the level of salaries for the ministers' new deputies and assistants. With their mid ranges of around \$220,000 and \$120,000 a month respectively, they are certainly very high by most people's standards. But for some highly qualified individuals in some industries and professions, these are average or even below-average pay levels.

It all depends what sort of people we want to attract to these positions. Despite the salaries, they will not simply be after the money. People are drawn to politics for other reasons. Many politicians around the world probably earn less in office than they would elsewhere (including some of my colleagues in the legislative council who work basically full-time for \$56,000 a month).

Nor are the people who take on these new positions likely to be famous high fliers from the business elite. These new positions would not fit into their career paths. Nor do they offer job security. While they could be a route to more senior roles in the government structure, they could also be dead ends. The people occupying these posts would have to take on interest groups and try to win over public opinion. They might end up very popular, or very unpopular.

Political skill is different from business, administrative or technical ability, so people from a wide range of backgrounds could have the talent for these new posts. If you look at our existing politicians in the government and in the legislative council, you will find people with backgrounds in education, medicine, the civil service, the media and labour organisations, as well as business and law.

However, if there is a 'typical' type of person ministers are likely to want for their political teams, it would probably be successful professionals in their 30s or 40s. So the bottom line is that we must pitch the pay at a level that will convince people like them to think seriously about it.

Some critics claim that the government would use these posts to reward political parties for support in the legislative council. Obviously, political appointees would have to be loyal to the government, but the government will not only look for talent in political parties. Given the high salaries, there would be a public outcry if these jobs went to low quality people as part of a political deal. But why would a minister want someone second rate on his team?

If the proposal to widen the political appointment system does not go through for some reason, it will not be the end of the world. But if it is accepted, it will be a step forward for our political system.