

SCMP – AOs leaving the civil service
10 Nov 2006

New head of the independent commission against corruption Fanny Law Fan Chiu-fun had an eventful time as permanent secretary for education and manpower.

Her main mission was school reform. Judging from the complaints about schools from parents and employers over the years, it was an essential task. But it was also very difficult. She faced fierce resistance, especially from teachers, including loud calls for her to resign.

The fact that she stayed is a credit to her determination. Many people in that situation would be tempted to walk away.

I recently met an administrative officer in her 40s who was moving between bureaus. She had a very tough time in her old post, where she had to face legislators and suffer in silence while they criticized and ridiculed her. Her new post puts her in a lower profile position. She is overjoyed.

She will stay in the civil service for the time being. But not all of her colleagues are doing so. There seems to be a trend for civil servants in the administrative stream to think about leaving at around that age, when they are about to enter the peak of their careers.

The Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce and the Hong Kong Productivity Council have each recently recruited a high flying civil servant from that age group, and another has left to study. Maybe it's just a coincidence. But I can't blame AOs at this level if they are tempted to leave.

As civil servants, they are politically neutral. They must implement political decisions impartially, whether they personally like the policy or not. They are also required to implement policies effectively.

That's easy enough if it is a policy that no-one disagrees with. But most policies attract some opposition, and it can be very strong when it comes to serious, perhaps overdue, reforms. In practice, the better the AOs do their job, the more pressure and hostility they can get.

Should we feel sorry for them? After all, this is part of the job, and they are very well paid. This is a fair point, but things have changed in recent years to put the AOs in a more difficult position.

Public expectations are higher, while the challenges facing the administration have become more complex. The political appointees who head the bureaus have to act more like politicians than their predecessors. The senior civil servants who report to them have to do the same.

The whole environment today is more politicized. Our political structure does not give the government a power base in the legislature or a direct mandate from the community. Officials get few thanks and little support when they are trying to implement good or popular policies. But they are attacked instantly if a policy doesn't suit a particular party or interest group.

Policy secretaries have the main responsibility for explaining and pushing policies. But they can't be everywhere. In practice, it is the AOs a few rungs down the ladder who spend much of the time in the firing line.

This is one reason why the proposal to bring in a second layer of political appointments – so-called assistant ministers – is worth considering. Such officials could behave like politicians and defend themselves and their policies against criticism from legislators and the press. Career civil servants who prefer a less confrontational role could focus on the technical aspects of implementing policy.

Ideally, government critics would save their harshest words for the policymakers at the top and not pick on AOs simply for doing their duty. AOs have very desirable skills and experience. If too many of them leave government, we run of the risk of a decline in the quality of our top civil servants, and then there would be even more to complain about.