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RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON FURTHER DEVELOPMENT  
 TO THE POLITICAL APPOINTMENT SYSTEM

The Basic Question

1. We begin by asking the most basic question: What would the creation of new political appointments do?
2. As best we can make out from the Consultation Paper and what officials have said in public, the Government appears to have in mind the following things:

*Regarding the Appointees:*

- (1) The expanded appointment system would bring new talent into public service. The new appointees could add fresh perspectives and skills to decision-making and to public administration.
- (2) Conversely, the new positions would represent opportunities for people who are not currently in the Government to serve the public and share political power.
- (3) As a related benefit, the new positions are opportunities to let aspiring (or undecided) politicians to gain exposure and experience.

*Regarding the Work:*

- (4) The new appointees would share the “political work” of the principal officials, i.e., the ministers.
- (5) The new appointees would “rise and fall” with the success or failure of the relevant government policies. This enhances accountability.
- (6) An expanded cadre of political appointees could strengthen internal coordination of the government.

Political Work

3. We do not think the Government and the principal officials need new political appointees to share their “political work”.

4. The most often cited example of political work is attendance at the Legislative Council to explain government policies or legislative proposals. It is said that the principal officials cannot do this alone, and that civil servants cannot help because they are “politically neutral”.
5. The logic of this argument misses the true meaning of political neutrality. Civil servants are personally politically neutral. In discharging their duties, e.g., explaining government decisions, they are agents of the government and of their respective principal officials.
6. The same applies to other so-called “political work”, e.g., liaison with political parties, politicians, and civil society actors. Indeed, many outside actors would prefer to liaise with government representatives who have no personal political agenda.

#### Policy Coordination

7. We are puzzled by the argument that having more outside appointees would strengthen internal coordination.
8. As is well known, at present, the Administrative Service is the tightest cadre of people involved in politics (in the loose sense of the word). Its training is focused on public administration, including procedures and cross-departmental coordination. Personal relationships among Administrative Officers are also a major advantage in facilitating coordination.
9. In contrast, new political appointees would come from diverse backgrounds. Unlike in other jurisdictions, our appointees will not be drawn from a ruling party. Many of them would have no experience in public policy and no prior relationship with each other. This is very unlikely that they could strengthen the Government’s internal coordination.

#### Rise and Fall on Success of Policies

10. We are equally puzzled by this argument. The Chief Executive and Principal officials are already responsible for the success of government policies. We do not see how adding another layer of appointees enhances accountability.
11. Accountability is about aligning decision-making power with responsibility. If a decision is political in nature, the decision lies with the principal official, and he must be responsible. He might have to apologize or even resign if his political judgment turns out to be wrong.
12. If it is technical or administrative in nature, the civil servant who has given the technical advice or made the administrative decision is primarily at fault. The principal official has to “take some heat” because of his management role. In this regard, two more layers of political appointees would not help as much as a proper review of the reward / disciplinary system for civil servants.

13. Indeed, we are concerned that the presence of political appointees would serve as an excuse for civil servants to “kick the problem upstairs” and evade their duty to make the non-political decisions.
14. In this regard, we urge the Government urgently to review what it expects from and how it will measure the job performance of civil servants, especially the Administrative Service and professional staff (e.g., planners, public health officers, construction engineers etc.).
15. We acknowledge that, in the current political environment, any misstatement by an official (whether a political appointee or a civil servant) can lead to very unpleasant accusations. Moreover, many of such so-call misstatements are justifiable when made, and regrettable only in retrospect. In this respect, the personal attacks they attract may be unreasonable.
16. It is unfair on civil servants, and detrimental to public administration, for them to have to face vicious personal attacks. In this regard, having new political appointees whose job includes “taking the fall” can be a healthy development of the whole system.
17. Seen in this light, the expansion of the political appointment system should be an opportunity to stress to the civil servants that, while they are protected from less reasonable political backlashes, they are subject to objective measures of performance – and that these measures will be enforced.

#### New Talent

18. We applaud the Government’s openness to bringing new talent, hopefully with fresh perspective and skills, into its decision-making.
19. This is important also because building a pool of talent is an important part of democratization.
20. Many commentators have pointed out the many difficulties, given the current political environment, with attracting good people into public service. Those in the business and professional sectors are unlikely to be willing to put aside their hard-earned career prospects. Academics are strong in some specialized areas but do not necessarily bring the practical experience that is perceived to be most needed.
21. But one has to start somehow. The creation of a dozen new quite-senior and another dozen mid-level positions for bringing in outside talent is a good first step in “crossing the river by feeling the stones”.
22. However, we are against using these positions effectively as “political bribes” to one or more political parties who wish to groom their talent. Unfortunately, we do not feel confident that the Government will choose the most qualified people available – and only people who can contribute – regardless of political association. We hope to be proved wrong.

23. We also wish to caution against filling too many of these positions with media professionals. Understandably, people with media background might be more willing than others to take up the new appointments (especially as Assistants to Directors of Bureaus). This is so because, given the nature of their work, a stint in government would not really be a break in career development. On the contrary, it could be very beneficial.
24. Certainly media professionals are often more familiar with public policy issues than business managers or other professionals. In this respect, they are well suited as candidates for appointments. But, as the Government has stated to be its intention, the new appointees should participate in decision-making and the implementation of policies. We would be against using the new appointees as “spin doctors”.

#### Costs and Inefficiencies

25. We appreciate that the salary costs of two dozen new appointees are relatively small. Perhaps this is so even if costs of secretarial support and office space etc. are added.
26. But there are hidden costs that would be significant. Civil servants in each policy bureau would have two more political officials to brief. Moreover, the line command would be blurred, potentially requiring more rounds of internal discussion and clearance or, worse still, resulting in unclear responsibility.
27. The problem is less serious with the “deputy ministers”. In the public mind, they would be above all civil servants, even the permanent secretary. In this regard, we trust that the Government would take care to appoint people who can work on good terms with their respective ministers.
28. The situation is unclear at the next level down. We suspect the role of each Assistant to the Director of Bureau would depend on the individual himself, on the Director, as well as on the new Deputy Director.
29. On balance, we think the costs to be worth the potential benefits, and that the inefficiencies to be manageable.
30. However, we wish to point out that the Government is seeking public support for its proposals on the basis of projected benefits and promises about costs. These matters – and indeed the success or failure in general – of the expanded political appointment system should be reviewed after implementation and in light of actual experience. We suggest a period of two years before review.

#### Some Concluding Words

31. In general, we support the Government’s proposals. But this is predicated on the following:

- (1) The Government chooses the best people for the job and only people who personally have something to contribute. It must not divide up the positions as political payments.
  - (2) The Government appoints people who can contribute substantively, not merely as spin doctors.
  - (3) Expanding the political appointment system helps only some problems. The government bureaucracy is in serious need of reform in at least two respects. First, there should be better cross-departmental coordination and policy-making. Second, civil servants, as technical experts and/or administrators, must also bear responsibility (perhaps internally within the Government) for decisions that are rightly theirs to make.
  - (4) The costs and benefits and success or failure of the expanded political appointment system should be reviewed in light of actual experience after implementation.
32. The 30SGroup is a self-funded young professionals forum not affiliated with any other organizations or individuals. We submit this response as a group of people who care deeply about how Hong Kong as our community and China as our country will grow and develop. More information about us as a group can be found on our website at [www.30SGroup.org](http://www.30SGroup.org).

The 30SGroup  
1 December 2006