

LCQ1: RTHK as a public service broadcaster

Following is a question by the Hon Hui Chi-fung and a reply by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau, in the Legislative Council today (December 12):

Question:

The Report on Review of Public Service Broadcasting in Hong Kong published in 2007 has pointed out that the status and structure of Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) as a government department does not fit the bill of a public service broadcaster in full. It has been reported that in August this year, the Director of Broadcasting prohibited the News and Current Affairs of RTHK from televising live a speech delivered by the Convenor of the Hong Kong National Party. Some members of the public have queried that the incident has reflected that the Director of Broadcasting, in his capacity as a department head, can hardly safeguard the editorial independence of RTHK as a public service broadcaster, simply by virtue of the Charter of Radio Television Hong Kong (the Charter) signed by RTHK with the Chief Secretary for Administration and the Chairman of the Broadcasting Authority. On the other hand, the Government submitted a funding proposal to the Public Works Subcommittee of this Council at the end of 2013 for the construction of a New Broadcasting House to replace the existing three buildings which were aging, had obsolete facilities and had run out of space, and for RTHK to implement new services and projects to fulfill its mission as a public service broadcaster, but the funding proposal was subsequently negated. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as it is stated in the Charter that RTHK will adhere to the editorial principles of being impartial in reflecting views and immune from commercial, political and/or other influences, whether the Government has assessed if the aforesaid act of the Director of Broadcasting has violated the spirit of the Charter; whether it will demand the Director of Broadcasting to undertake to continue to safeguard RTHK's editorial independence and keep RTHK immune from external interferences;

(2) of the measures in place to ensure that RTHK is provided with sufficient resources to fulfill its mission as a public service broadcaster; the follow-up work undertaken by the Government on the construction of the New Broadcasting House and the latest progress made; and

(3) whether it has studied the disestablishment of RTHK from the government structure and giving RTHK financial and operational autonomy, with a view to ensuring that RTHK will adhere to the editorial principle of being immune from political and commercial influences; if so, of the outcome; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Report on Review of Public Service Broadcasting in Hong Kong published in 2007 mentioned in the Hon Hui Chi-fung's question was prepared by the Committee on Review of Public Service Broadcasting, which had been appointed by the Government in 2006 to review the future development of public service broadcasting in Hong Kong. After extensive discussion and consultation, the Government made its decisions on the matter. In September 2009, the Government announced the way forward for Hong Kong's public service broadcasting and decided that Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) would undertake the work of Hong Kong's public service broadcaster and maintain its status as a Government department. Subsequently, in August 2010, the Government promulgated the Charter of RTHK (the Charter), which specifies the public purposes and mission of RTHK, the key programme areas of activities undertaken by RTHK and the modes of service delivery, thereby strengthening RTHK's governance.

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Hui Chi-fung is as follows:

(1) Aside from stipulating that RTHK is editorially independent and that it must adhere to the editorial principles of being impartial in the views it reflects and being immune from commercial, political and/or other influences, the Charter also clearly states that the Director of Broadcasting is RTHK's Editor-in-chief. RTHK has all along been committed to providing professional radio, television and new media services to the Hong Kong people in accordance with the Charter. As RTHK's Editor-in-chief, the Director of Broadcasting has been responsible for making the final editorial decisions in RTHK and accountable for editorial decisions taken by RTHK programme producers.

(2) The Government attaches great importance to public service broadcasting, and has allocated quite a lot of resources to RTHK to provide radio, television and new media services and to implement new development projects, including the launch and enhancement of digital terrestrial television broadcasting and the implementation of the Community Involvement Broadcasting Service. RTHK's expenditure rose from \$469.9 million in 2010-11 to an estimated \$1,012.5 million in 2018-19, representing an increase by 115 per cent. This is higher than the overall increase by 85 per cent in the Government's expenditure for the same period. As for manpower, RTHK's civil service posts of 738 in 2018-19 represent an increase by 41 per cent (or 215 posts) as compared with 2010-11. This is in comparison to an increase by 14 per cent in the Government's entire civil service establishment for the same period.

As for the New Broadcasting House (New BH) project, the Government had submitted to the Public Works Subcommittee of the Legislative Council in December 2013 a funding application of \$6 billion for the construction of the New BH in Tseung Kwan O. However, the application was negated by the Legislative Council. Subsequently in January 2014, the Government reduced the cost to \$5.3 billion in response to the request of the Subcommittee Members. Unfortunately, it was ultimately not supported by the majority of

Subcommittee members. As such, the New BH project was unable to proceed on schedule as planned.

RTHK and the Architectural Services Department have been examining the proposal, having regard to the views and concerns of the Legislative Council over the cost estimate and scope of the New BH project, with a view to working out a proposal that meets RTHK's operational requirements and can address Members' views.

As the option of constructing a joint-user building is more cost-effective than an independent New BH, we have been exploring along this direction.

(3) With respect to Part 3 of the Hon Hui's question, the Government has no plan to conduct such a study.