

LCQ2: Under Secretaries and Political Assistants

Following is a question by the Hon Yung Hoi-yan and a reply by the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Mr Patrick Nip, in the Legislative Council today (March 27):

Question:

In 2008, the Government created two additional layers of political appointment positions, namely Under Secretaries and Political Assistants. The duty of the Under Secretaries is to assist the Secretaries of Departments in handling political responsibilities and the Political Assistants are responsible for providing political analyses and advice for principal officials as well as conducting political liaison work. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has regularly conducted comprehensive reviews of the duties and work efficiency of the Under Secretaries and Political Assistants; if so, of the specific indicators adopted in the reviews and the outcome of the last review; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it has provided the Under Secretaries and Political Assistants with professional training to enhance their lobbying skills and their capability to liaise with the media and the public; if so, of the mode and effectiveness of the training; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will consider adding a range of objective entry qualifications and assessments to the mechanisms for selecting Under Secretaries and Political Assistants, so as to ensure that the candidates selected possess a high level of professional capabilities; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Political Appointment System is an integral part of the governing team of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government. In 2002, the HKSAR Government introduced the first batch of politically appointed Secretaries of Department and Directors of Bureau to create a political tier at the top echelon of the Government. In 2008, the Political Appointment System was further developed leading to the creation of two additional layers of political appointment positions, namely Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants, thus forming the current three-tier Political Appointment System.

Hong Kong is a diversified and liberal society. Given the heightening aspirations from the public on the Government, it is not uncommon that

different stakeholders take different and even opposing stances and views towards government policies. The introduction of the Political Appointment System was to respond to social changes in the hope of allowing more flexibility and interaction in the governance of the HKSAR Government, and ensuring the timely and effective implementation of policies in response to public aspirations and social needs. Under the Political Appointment System, posts such as Secretaries of Department, Directors of Bureau, Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants are filled by talents of different sectors, backgrounds and age groups flexibly drawn from within and outside the Government. With the support of a high-quality, professional and permanent civil service, the HKSAR Government is able to make better-informed decisions, implement policies more effectively, and nurture political talents for the HKSAR. A case in point is the Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants of the current-term Government. They are talents from various sectors of the community with different professional backgrounds, such as public administration, political parties, business, professionals, academia, media and think tanks, etc.

Politically appointed officials must keep their fingers on the pulse of the society and interact with the community to, through two-way communication, promote better understanding of government policies among members of the public while gauging a wide spectrum of public views, so as to keep government decisions close to the community and meet the needs of the community. Politically appointed officials must also share the Chief Executive (CE)'s philosophy of governance and work with the CE to implement his/her manifesto.

With regard to the Hon Mrs Regina Ip's question raised by the Hon Yung Hoi-yan, after consulting the relevant offices and bureaux, I am providing a consolidated reply as follows:

(1) Deputy Directors of Bureau report directly to Directors of Bureau and are responsible principally for assisting Directors of Bureau in undertaking the full range of political work, especially in Legislative Council (LegCo) business. This includes: attending meetings of the LegCo and its committees, panels and subcommittees; explaining government policies; and lobbying political parties, Members of various Councils and different sectors of society for their support for government proposals on policy, legislation and public expenditure. Deputy Directors of Bureau also attend activities of political parties, community organisations, and business and professional associations as well as public forums, seminars and consultation sessions, etc. to strengthen the communication between the Government and different sectors of the community. Furthermore, Deputy Directors of Bureau maintain close liaison with the media to explain government policies. They also deputise for Directors of Bureau during the latter's temporary absence (such as on duty visits and on leave).

Political Assistants are responsible for providing political analysis and advice for Secretaries of Departments, Directors of Bureau and Deputy Directors of Bureau, and conducting political liaison as well as lobbying work. This includes maintaining communication with political parties, LegCo Members, the media and relevant stakeholders, such as youth groups and

community organisations. Political Assistants are also tasked with preparing speeches and media statements. The current-term Government attaches particular importance to youth development work by addressing young people's concerns on education, career pursuit and home ownership, and encouraging their participation in public policy discussion, debate and political activities. In this regard, since the Political Assistants assumed office, they have been visiting schools from time to time as arranged by the Education Bureau to have exchanges with students to learn more about their thinking, so as to close the gap between the Government and the youth.

Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants of all bureaux/offices are required to report their work to their respective Secretaries of Department or Directors of Bureau. Secretaries of Department and Directors of Bureau supervise their respective Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants, and review their work performance.

(2) On the front of training, while courses of the Civil Service Training and Development Institute target primarily at civil servants, Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants are also welcomed to attend courses relating to leadership enhancement, negotiation strategies and skills, media and public communication, interaction with District Councils, etc. In addition, the Chief Executive's Office (CE's Office) also arranges seminars and experience-sharing sessions for Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants from time to time, with a view to facilitating their effective day-to-day work. For instance, some Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants attended a national studies course offered by the Chinese Academy of Governance in Beijing last September. The programme covered topics such as politics, economy, foreign affairs, national security and social system. In-house seminars on law drafting procedures and the work of the Administration Wing etc. were also arranged by the CE's Office last year specifically for Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants to increase their knowledge on the operation of the Government.

(3) As regards the appointment of Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants, under the existing mechanism, an appointment committee chaired by the CE is responsible for assessing and considering the proposed candidates for the positions of Deputy Directors of Bureau and Political Assistants for appointment by the CE. The appointment committee comprises the Secretaries of Department, the relevant Directors of Bureau and the Director of the CE's Office. In forming her governing team, the incumbent CE's principle is to attract talents widely and on merit. In consideration of the proposed candidates, the appointment committee will deliberate on all relevant factors, such as that the person must be a Hong Kong permanent resident; has a sense of commitment to the country, Hong Kong and the community; shares the CE's philosophy of governance; possesses the knowledge of or experience in the affairs, profession or sector related to the scope of duties, and the capability of handling political and government work; can work well with the Principal Official whom he/she is to serve; and is ready to assume political responsibility for the decision of the political team collectively, to ensure that the appointee possesses the right calibre and qualities required.

The Government will, in the light of operational experience, further

enhance the Political Appointment System as and when necessary.

Thank you, President.