

**Extract of minutes of special meeting on  
House Committee held on 18 May 2001**

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**Introductory Remarks by CS**

5. As regards establishing a system of accountability for principal officials, CS said that the Administration would need to give careful consideration as this was an important matter and had far-reaching implications on the political structure and civil service system in Hong Kong. CS explained that under the present system, most principal official posts were held by pensionable civil servants. The advantages of the present system were that principal officials could focus on objective analyses of policies while maintaining high administrative efficiency and integrity. However, principal officials at the level of Secretaries and Directors of Bureaux also assumed an important role in policy formulation and implementation, and in explaining and promoting such policies following approval by the Chief Executive (CE) in Council. These principal officials therefore played a role similar to that of ministers. As such, it had become increasingly difficult for the public to accept that principal officials were politically neutral.

6. CS added that civil servants could be punished on grounds of misconduct or inefficiency under an impartial investigation system, but they, including principal officials, could not be held personally accountable for policy failures within their portfolios under the present collective accountability system. If principal officials were to be held accountable for the outcome of their policies, they should not be career civil servants, but "political appointees" and a suitable appointment system would need to be put in place, setting out clearly their powers, responsibilities and relationships with CE and with the permanent civil service.

7. CS informed Members that CE was discussing with the relevant policy bureaux and hoped to be able to provide a blueprint of a system of accountability for principal officials in his coming Policy Address. CS added that any such system should be consistent with the existing provisions in the Basic Law.

8. CS said that it was equally important to maintain the stability of the civil service structure and to preserve the principles of permanence and neutrality of the civil service, so that it would continue to serve with commitment, objectivity and with the long-term benefits of the community in mind. He pointed out that the civil service had undergone a period of transition and adjustment following the reunification in 1997. The civil service had also been working under unusual strain as a result of the Asian financial turmoil, the

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Enhanced Productivity Programme and “salary freeze”. To maintain an efficient and stable civil service, it would be necessary to sustain staff morale and ensure that the civil service would keep pace with times and be responsive to the needs of the community through, for example, staff training and development. CS further said that civil servants at different levels should also be prepared that there would be greater public demand for increased accountability on the part of the civil service. He added that a highly efficient, professional and politically neutral civil service would be conducive to a constructive working relationship with LegCo.