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Paper for the House Committee meeting on 7 June 2002

**Report of the Panel on Manpower concerning
the proposed amalgamation of
the Labour Portfolio with the Economic Development Portfolio
under the proposed accountability system for principal officials**

Purpose

This paper reports on the deliberations of the Panel on Manpower concerning the proposed amalgamation of the Labour portfolio with the Economic Development portfolio under the proposed accountability system for principal officials, and seeks the House Committee's view on the Panel's suggestion that the Chief Executive (CE) be invited to explain to Members the Administration's revised proposals.

Background

2. On 17 April 2002, in his address to the Legislative Council, CE presented the framework of the new accountability system for principal officials and the details relating to its implementation. A subcommittee under the House Committee was formed to study the proposed accountability system and related issues.

3. Under the proposed accountability system, the Administration initially proposed to place the Manpower portfolio and the Commerce and Industry portfolio under one Director of Bureau. During the motion debate on the accountability system for principal officials held at the Council meeting on 29 May 2002, the Chief Secretary for Administration (CS) announced, among other changes, that the Labour portfolio would be amalgamated with the Economic Development portfolio, while manpower development, including training and retraining, will continue to be dealt with by the Secretary for Education and Manpower.

4. At the meeting of the Subcommittee to Study the Proposed System of Accountability for Principal Officials and Related Issues on 31 May 2002, the Subcommittee decided not to hold further meetings to meet with deputations. The Subcommittee noted that it would be for the relevant Panels to decide whether they would wish to invite views on the revised proposals relating to the splitting, merging and retention of policy bureaux.

5. The Panel on Manpower held a special meeting on 4 June 2002 to discuss the proposed amalgamation of the Labour and Economic Development portfolios, and the retention of the Manpower portfolio in the Manpower and Education Bureau, as announced by CS during the motion debate on 29 May 2002. Representatives from the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions also attended the meeting. In addition, written submissions were received from the Federation of Hong Kong Industries and the Hong Kong & Kowloon Trades Union Council.

Main Deliberations of the Panel

6. Some Members have expressed concern about the proposed amalgamation of the Labour portfolio with the Economic Development portfolio. They are worried that given Government's emphasis on promoting economic development, labour policy will be made to merely cope with the needs of economic development, hence the interests of workers will be sacrificed. They consider that the proposed amalgamation of the two portfolios will equally create conflicts as in the case of the original proposal of placing the Manpower portfolio and the Commerce and Industry portfolio under one Director of Bureau. These Members have also pointed out that in putting forward the revised proposal, the Administration is giving the impression that the Labour portfolio can be grouped with any policy portfolio.

7. Some Members have suggested that there should be a dedicated Director of Bureau to be responsible for the Labour and Manpower portfolios, given the economic restructuring in Hong Kong and the problem of high unemployment. A Member has asked whether the Administration has considered merging of the Labour portfolio with the Welfare Services portfolio.

8. A Member has also expressed doubt whether it is necessary for the Permanent Secretary overseeing labour matters to be pitched at D8 level as manpower development, including training and retraining, will no longer be within his purview. Some Members have also asked about the detailed figures of the employment opportunities to be provided by the tourism and logistic industries as stated by CS in his speech made during the motion debate on 29 May 2002.

Attendance of government representatives at Panel meeting

9. The Panel wishes also to report to the House Committee that although it had invited representatives from the Constitutional Affairs Bureau and the Economic Services Bureau to the meeting, the Secretary for Constitutional Affairs has advised that it is appropriate for the representatives from the Education and Manpower Bureau to attend the meeting and explain the Administration's position on the revised proposals. There is no need for representatives from the two Bureaux to attend the meeting.

10. Although Members appreciate the efforts made by the Secretary for Education and Manpower (SEM) to try to answer Members' questions at the meeting, it seems that SEM does not have the information or is not in the position to give an answer to most of Members' questions. Most Members consider that as the proposed accountability system is within the purview of the Secretary for Constitutional Affairs, he should have attended the meeting. However, these Members also consider that even the Secretary for Constitutional Affairs may not be able to answer the queries raised by Members. They have suggested that CE should be invited to explain to Members the revised proposals and to answer questions from Members.

11. The Panel agrees to suggest to the House Committee that CE should be invited to explain to Members the revised proposals and to answer questions from Members.

Advice Sought

12. Members are invited to note the deliberations of the Panel and to consider the suggestion of the Panel in paragraph 11 above .

Council Business Division 2
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