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CS' opening remarks at the press conference on accountability system

The following is the opening remarks by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Donald Tsang, at the press conference to explain details of the accountability system for principal officials today (April 17):

This is an extremely important day for Hong Kong. Two hours ago in the Legislative Council, the Chief Executive announced the most significant changes to governance in Hong Kong that anyone of us can remember. The changes are far-reaching, progressive and will affect everyone in the community. Yet, they are simple in concept; easy to legislate; and preserve the finest traditions of our civil service.

It is important therefore that we do all we can to make the changes clear to the community and explain carefully how they will benefit them.

I do not intend to go into details in these opening remarks as the Chief Executive has already made a very full statement. I do want to say that I have been very closely involved in the debate and design of the Accountability System for Principal Officials. I fully support the new system because I believe it is good for government and good, therefore, for the people of Hong Kong.

As you know, the Chief Executive proposes to create 14 new politically-appointed posts comprising the Chief Secretary, Financial Secretary, Secretary for Justice and 11 other Principal Official posts. The Chief Secretary's post, which I currently hold, will continue to be the first deputy to the Chief Executive, as enshrined in the Basic Law. Under the new arrangements, the Chief Secretary will continue to coordinate the work of various Bureaux; assist the Chief Executive in setting the Administration's overall political agenda and prioritise the legislative programme. The Chief Secretary will play a key role in building a better relationship with the Legislative Council.

More generally, I want to place on record why I believe the Accountability System is good for the public, the Legislature, the Administration and the Civil Service.



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First, the proposed system serves the public better, because -

- * The new principal officials, unlike permanent civil servants, will be personally accountable for the success or failures of their policy areas;
- * they will have to immerse themselves more deeply in public debate and the concerns of their fellow citizens if their five-year-term political agendas they are required to set are to meet public priorities and aspirations; and
- * there will be a single authoritative voice for each area of public policy.

Second, the new system will promote a better relationship with LegCo, because -

- * The Administration will have a sharply focused political agenda and a well-defined legislative programme;
- * accountability will no longer be diffused among bureaux and committees; and
- * policy agendas will have to correspond more closely with public priorities and aspirations; as well as to address the needs of LegCo.

Third, I believe the system will lead to more effective governance, because-

- * An Executive Council comprising, at its core, the Chief Executive and all of his Principal Officials is much more in tune with the Cabinet-type principles and practices of an executive-led government;
- * there will be a clear division between the political and policy responsibilities of the Principal Officials and the administrative and executive responsibilities of the Permanent Secretaries and his or her civil service colleagues; and

For the civil service,

- * Our much cherished system remains intact and will not be eroded by politics. The importance of the civil service system is also greatly emphasised by the Chief



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Executive. There will continue to be a permanent and stable, meritocratic and politically neutral service;

* the Secretary for the Civil Service will come from the civil service. His or her remit will be to preserve the existing systems of appointment, transfer, promotion, discipline etc. as mandated by the Basic Law; and

* the Secretary for the Civil Service will be a full member of the Executive Council, bringing the civil service perspective fully to bear on policy-making.

I am sure in my own mind that none of us has anything to fear from the new Accountability System, and much to gain.

Now my colleagues and I would be happy to take your questions.

End/Wednesday, April 17, 2002

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- [Transcript of press conference on accountability system. \(17.04.2002\)](#)
- [SCS writes to colleagues on Accountability System \(17.04.2002\)](#)
- [FS' transcript \(17.04.2002\)](#)

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Transcript of press conference on accountability system

The following is the transcript of the press conference this (April 17) afternoon to explain the details of the accountability system for principal officials (English portion):

Reporter: The Basic Law states that the ultimate aim of Hong Kong is to achieve universal suffrage and my question is there have been a lot of criticism about the current revamp of the Government because people said it doesn't make any step towards beginning the process towards universal suffrage. Is this revamp a substitute for that debate and does the government have any intention to begin public consultations and keep the ball rolling on moves towards electing directly the Chief Executive?

Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Donald Tsang: Well, you're taking the matter very far. The timetable for considering constitutional reform is enshrined in the Basic Law. The next stage of constitutional action would be the enlargement of the franchise in the election of the legislature in 2004. And there will be further visit into a constitutional arrangement in 2007, and that is stated in the Basic Law. What we are trying to do now, is to inject a higher level of accountability among Government officials to the public through the legislature. They will be working much more closely with the legislature. To me, it is a positive step in preparation of the next stage of constitutional arrangements and development.

Reporter: If under this accountability system, Chief Secretary, public officials would have to go out and stump through their policies. Why don't they start with this policy? Why don't you have the people who are going to be named be named, and have them go out there and sell this change to the people, rather than try to promote the change and tell us later who's going to have the job?

Mr Tsang: I would love to do that if we have the resources for doing so. There is a question of approval for the posts by the legislature. We must do one thing at a time. What we are trying to do is to secure the legislative proposal for a transfer of authority from the present incumbents to the new holders . And secondly, more important, to



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secure the resources for the creation of these posts, to pay for these offices. So as soon as we have the resources for the creation of these posts, I am sure they will participate with us, with the rest of the civil service, and make sure that our proposed policy will be fully understood and there will be full interactions between the executive and legislature on all policy proposals.

Reporter: If it's a resource question, what is the resource implication please?

Mr Tsang: Well, what we need is money to pay for the 14 officials concerned. It amounts to about 43 million dollars a year.

Information Coordinator, Mr Stephen Lam: We have stated that within one year we intend to make the exercise cost neutral.

Mr Tsang: In other words, we'll find the savings to offset that expenditure within a year.

Reporter: Given the Chief Executive is not a member of political party, is it reasonable to assume that the same restriction will apply to these new appointments? And equally, is it reasonable to assume that none of these new appointees can be legislators for reason of restrictions in the Basic Law and so on?

Mr Lam: Clearly, a member of the legislature cannot become a principal official. That's in the Basic Law. That implies that we will not have a member of the legislature becoming any of the 14 officials. But there is no restriction about these principal officials being a party member or member of a certain organisation.

Reporter: ... language in the Basic Law ... the principal officials referred to include both the political appointees and the policy secretaries

Mr Tsang: The principal officials defined in the Basic Law includes the secretary of departments, as you find out in the law, secretary of departments, departments in that case refer to Chief Secretary's Office, the Financial Secretary's Office and the Secretary of Justice's Office, and also include the heads of bureaux, which we see it now. What we are proposing to do is, under the accountability system, those officials



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are appointed to become the heads of departments as defined under the Basic Law, in other words, filling those three posts and also filling the heads of bureaux posts, as you find there.

The present incumbents as heads of bureaux will become the permanent secretaries. As a result, they will cease to be principal officials as defined under the Basic Law.

(Please also refer to the Chinese Portion.)

End/Wednesday, April 17, 2002

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