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Super policy secretaries only part of the way forward

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A MINISTERIAL system with the objective of establishing greater accountability among top civil servants is being considered by the Government.

But it is difficult to know what can be achieved through such a system, which is likely to be announced in Tung Chee-hwa's October 10 Policy Address and Implemented at the start of his second term next July.

After all, this is not an entirely new arrangement within the executive branch of government. Nor does it represent any fundamental change in its relationship with the legislature or the political system as a whole.

Soon after his 1996 election, Tung Chee-hwa assigned special responsibilities to several of his Executive Councillors. Leung Chun-ying was put in charge of housing, Tam Yiu-chung was given services for the elderly, and Antony Leung Kam-chung - who is now Financial Secretary - was made responsible for education. But that led to considerable resentment among senior civil servants and resistance to the possibility of creating super policy secretaries, especially from outside the civil-service system. And when vacancies for policy-secretary positions did subsequently emerge, Mr Tung showed little enthusiasm for filling them from outside the civil service, apparently due to the difficulty in identifying and recruiting appropriate candidates.

Now, the proposed new system is likely to consist of a 'kitchen cabinet' of about six senior policy secretaries, who will each be responsible for co-ordinating the work of several policy bureaus. They will also be members of the Executive Council and so might help transform this advisory body into the nerve centre of the administration.

The community's initial interest focuses on who will be the new senior policy secretaries. At least some of them will have to come from the civil service in order to ensure continuity, maintain the morale of senior civil servants, and guarantee a good understanding of how the civil service works. But if all of them come from the civil service, cynics will see the new arrangement as simply designed to improve the remuneration of a privileged few top civil servants.

So where should the other senior policy secretaries come from? One option is to appoint people who have acquired a good understanding of how government works through running public-sector bodies - such as the Mandatory Provident Fund Authority and Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing, to name just two - but who also have experience in the private sector. But the problem is that many of these public-sector bodies have been used as shelters for former top civil servants seeking better-paid positions outside the Government itself, and so those who hold such positions lack private-sector experience.

Another good source of senior policy secretaries would be chairpersons of Important government-advisory committees, because these people work closely with senior civil servants and are supposed to be appointed on the

basis that they are highly respected in the business or profession from which they come.

But the problem is that Mr Tung's administration has not been paying serious attention to expanding its recruitment of talent to join these advisory committees, resulting in the same old faces heading such bodies for a long time.

Another option for the Chief Executive to consider is appointing experienced legislators who are supportive of the Government. Some are well-known to Hong Kong people and have long been involved in specific policy areas. But, if appointed, they would have to leave the legislature and terminate any party affiliations.

If some of the appointees are from the private sector, there will also need to be clear guidelines covering any possible conflicts of interest, especially to counter the community's perception of growing collusion between government and big-business groups since the handover.

Wherever the new recruits are drawn from, implementation of a ministerial system will give Mr Tung the chance to form his own team of those who share a strong consensus on political orientation and policy programmes. Team members should be ready to defend with conviction and enthusiasm not only the Chief Executive but also the Government as a whole.

If senior policy secretaries were offered five-year contracts lasting until Mr Tung steps down at the end of his second term in 2007, then the issue of contract renewal would not arise. Although they could be dismissed before this, to do so would imply that Mr Tung and his administration had made the wrong choice in appointing them. However, the Legislative Council could, in theory, put pressure on the Chief Executive to terminate such contracts earlier, by passing a motion of no confidence in a senior policy secretary.

Finally, the community has the right to demand an answer to an important question the Tung administration has so far neglected. Namely, when will these moves towards greater accountability for top civil servants be accompanied by serious consideration of the further democratisation of the SAR's political system? That is an issue on which Mr Tung should explain his position in his Policy Address.

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