



PREPARED BY

**DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE
FOR BETTERMENT OF HONG KONG**

PANEL ON CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

SPECIAL MEETING

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ON

**THE ROLE AND DEVELOPMENT OF
POLITICAL PARTIES**

Introduction

The DAB believes that political parties are the necessary building blocks of a stable and mature political system. Political parties enable meaningful participation of various sectors of the society in the political system. They play a crucial role – not just in representing interests, but also aggregating preferences, and actively monitoring the performance of the Government.

The development of political parties in Hong Kong has but a very brief history and is still in its infancy. Much deliberation and care is required to provide a proper environment for parties to continue to develop in Hong Kong. While the introduction of legislation – either by way of amending existing laws or by the enactment of a separate piece of political party legislation – could assist political parties in gaining legal recognition, enhancing financial and operational transparency, legislation could also unduly restrict the development of political parties. Therefore the DAB urges the Government to consider and explore various measures to facilitate further development of political parties in Hong Kong.

The Present Situation

Maturity

At present there are three major parties existing in Hong Kong, the DAB, the Liberal Party and the Democratic Party, founded in 1994, 1993 and 1994 respectively. Within this short period of time, although political parties have had many achievements, they are still in its infancy, measured by:

- (a) Their policy researching capability;
- (b) Number of participants and membership;
- (c) Ability to cross different sectors of the society; and
- (d) A coherent set of long-range policy objectives with which to assess individual legislative initiative.

Stability

In general, leaderships within political parties in Hong Kong have remained fairly stable. Stability of leaderships, however, may also encroach on innovation and progress advocated by younger members of any one party, stifling its growth potentials. In some cases, clashes of views internally have led to the exodus of young members, further depleting a party's human and political resources. For long-term development, a political party must have training of young members as one of its main objectives.

Coherent set of Policy Objectives

It is imperative for political parties to be developed into a modern organization with a coherent set of policies to cultivate electoral support. Two factors which typically but adversely affect growth in this area are:

- ***The Urgent Overriding the Long-term Considerations:*** Due to the scarcity of resources within parties in conducting researches, resources are often allocated to urgent topics being debated in the Legislative Council at the expense of long-range policy research. As a result, political parties are hard pressed in the formulation of a coherent set of policies with which to measure the merits of individual legislative initiatives. The consistency of policy objectives in turn affects the public's ability to ascertain or predict the position which a party may adopt on a particular issue.
- ***The Visible Overriding the Substantial:*** For obvious reasons, there is a prevailing tendency for party members to be engaged in activities which are more publicly visible. Research analyses and trainings are therefore often accorded with a lower priority, which, in effect, affects the quality of the policy debates.

These factors help to explain, in part, why political parties in Hong Kong face the same challenges found by their counterparts in the rest of the world. They suffer from a lack of voter loyalty and are confronted with a rise of anti-party sentiment and non-party actors. A carefully drafted political party law, whether by way of amending existing laws or enacting a separate piece of political party legislation, together with other executive measures to be taken by the HKSAR Government, could serve to alleviate some of these problems.

Recognition of Political Parties

At present, the Legislative Council is a collection of various political groups some of which still do not consider themselves political parties. Outside of the Legislative Council, there are many political groups but few of them would refer to themselves as political parties. This clearly demonstrates a lack of incentive for political groups to be organized as political parties. Further studies are needed to ascertain whether these political parties find the existing legislations sufficient to suit their organizational needs.

If the consensus of the public is in favour of enacting political party legislation, any proposed party legislation must aim to enhance and not restrict party development. Impositions of restrictions, or controls, will only drive people further away from organizing themselves as parties. It has been suggested that a voluntary system of registration built on the principles of transparency and fairness is to be preferred. Under this proposal, political groups are free to adopt a non-party organizational structure if they so choose. This proposal merits further studies.

Measures to Facilitate Political Party Development

The newly introduced Financial Assistance Scheme in the last Legco election, together with the measures pertaining to printing of party particulars on ballot papers, have served to confer a partial recognition on political groups, including political parties. From this beginning, the DAB invites the Government to consider further measures such as public subsidies to political parties, either by way of direct funding on research projects, or in-direct subsidies such as media coverage, access to Government research findings, and tax concessions.

As we mentioned above, political parties typically struggle with a lack of resources for research analysis. The direct funding of research projects conducted by parties, or the sharing of research findings by the Government, will contribute significantly in solving this problem.

Provision of media coverage, which is usually financially unaffordable by political parties, will enhance public awareness of the operation and policy platform of the parties. This in turn will increase voter-loyalty and participation by the public

in the political system.

In order to provide further financial resources to parties, tax deductibility for political donations is a topic worth of further consideration.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the DAB is of the view that while legislation may not be the best answer to strengthening political parties, the Government is urged to explore more alternatives to further the development of political parties.

The DAB has the following recommendations:

1. Providing more opportunities for members of political parties to actively participate in various advisory bodies;
2. Expanding the scope and level of financial assistance under the Financial Assistance Scheme to further alleviate the financial burden of election expenses;
3. Increasing the number of seats in the Legislative Council to 70;
4. Providing financial assistance to political parties to conduct long-range policy research;
5. Making Government research findings available to political parties. In this connection, the establishment of a centralized research database could be considered; and
6. Providing tax incentives to all financial donors of political parties, with a certain degree of transparency acceptable to the general public.