

**Extract from the minutes of meeting of the
Panel on Home Affairs held on 10 December 2004**

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V. Review of advisory and statutory bodies

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)342/04-05(03)-(04) and Annex D to LC Paper No. CB(2)3059/03-04(01)]

31. DSHA(1) said that at the meeting of the Panel on 14 July 2004, members had been consulted on the proposal to establish a consultative forum which was summarised in paragraph 2 of the Administration's paper. DSHA(1) said that members' views were sought on the progress report on the establishment of the Public Affairs Forum.

32. Ms Emily LAU considered that the Public Affairs Forum fell far short of expectations on how the Government would, as mentioned in the 2004 Policy Address, involve more middle class people in political affairs and the policy-making process. Ms LAU asked whether the Administration had consulted the views of the middle class people or any political parties/affiliations on the current proposal.

33. DSHA(1) responded that after the subject was last discussed on 14 July 2004, the Administration had received enthusiastic feedback from many people expressing interest in participating in the proposed consultative forum. DSHA(1) said that the Public Affairs Forum would consist of 600 members from the business, professional and academic fields. The Administration would designate 120 (20%) out of the 600 places for candidates nominated by political parties and groups with political affiliations in LegCo. DSHA(1) explained that the Public Affairs Forum was aimed at providing an additional channel to canvass the views of business, professional and middle class people and people from academia who could not afford the time to sit on boards and committees but who would like to contribute to the discussion of public issues. DSHA(1) said that a new modus operandi would be adopted for the Public Affairs Forum, which would conduct discussions by way of the Internet so as to allow forum members maximum flexibility in participating in the forum discussions.

34. DSHA(1) further said that the Public Affairs Forum would operate mainly through a dedicated website which would provide a platform (in the form of a discussion room) for exchange of views among members of the forum. DSHA(1) explained that members of the public, government bureaux and departments, and members of the Public Affairs Forum could access the forum's website. Access to the discussion room would, however, be restricted to members of the forum, and Government bureaux and departments. DSHA(1)

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said that a small secretariat would also be set up to service the Public Affairs Forum, and summaries of views expressed by members of the forum would be prepared and posted on the forum's website for viewing by the public. DSHA(1) added that the cost implications of establishing the Public Affairs Forum were only about several hundred thousand dollars a year.

35. Ms Emily LAU said that although it did not require the approval of LegCo to implement the Public Affairs Forum, she considered that the forum would merely be a waste of money and would not have much use. Dr Fernando CHEUNG echoed Ms LAU's views. He said that he did not expect for such a narrow-minded proposal recommending the setting up of a forum with nothing special and comprising a membership restricted to a small circle of people only. Dr CHEUNG pointed out that the proposal completely failed to address the problems in the appointment system of ASBs, such as the lack of transparency, appointments being restricted to people who were supportive of the Government, non-compliance with the six-year and six-board rules, low participation rate of women, etc. Dr CHEUNG further said that he and many other people had actually hoped that, through the current review, the appointment system could be improved in such ways that appointments would be made based on the principle of merit and more middle class professionals and talents would be appointed.

36. DSHA(1) clarified that the review of ASBs had yet to be completed and apart from the 12 interim reports submitted in the previous legislative session, the Administration would submit further interim reports on individual topics to the Panel before completion of the review. DSHA(1) reiterated that the Public Affairs Forum was aimed at solving the problem that the current framework of ASBs failed to canvass the views of middle class people who could not afford the time to sit on boards and committees but who would like to contribute to the discussion of public issues. DSHA(1) pointed out that the existing ASBs already comprised many middle class people as their members. Other than establishing the Public Affairs Forum, the Administration would explore if it was possible to further enhance the participation of middle class people in the existing ASBs.

37. DSHA(1) further said that the current framework of ASBs had another shortcoming that each of them had specific terms of reference. However, the Public Affairs Forum could provide channels for discussion of general political issues of the day and any matters of common concern to the community.

38. Dr Fernando CHEUNG and Mr WONG Ting-kwong suggested that consideration should be given to opening up access to the discussion room to the public instead of only members of the forum and Government bureaux/departments. DSHA(1) responded that the Administration was concerned that in that case, there might be too many participants and some

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might not observe the rules of participation, or who might even hack into the website or launch personal attacks on other people.

39. In response to Mr WONG Ting-kwong, DSHA(1) said that the number of members of the Public Affairs Forum could be increased if the forum was well received.

40. Mr WONG Ting-kwong further asked how the views expressed by members of the forum would reach the Principal Officials concerned and whether there were other communication channels between them. DSHA(1) said that other than discussions on the forum's website, if there were any major policy issues published, the Principal Officials concerned might also convene forums to meet forum members in person to collect their views. DSHA(1) further said that with the provision of the Public Affairs Forum, Government bureaux/Principal Officials concerned could listen to the views of the forum members instantly, and both sides could conduct interactive discussions on the forum's website. Mr WONG considered that since the costs of establishing the Public Affairs Forum were limited, the Administration could give it a try.

41. Mr Albert HO expressed strong reservations about the establishment of the Public Affairs Forum and criticised the Administration for creating a new kind of elitism under the current proposal. Mr HO considered that the problem with the proposal was that only a small group of people who were selected by the Government would be consulted on important issues and the representativeness of this small group of people was also doubtful. Mr HO was concerned that the Government would create a distorted picture of the middle class people's views on certain issues in consulting this small group of people only. Mr HO supported opening up access to the discussion room to the public.

42. DSHA(1) responded that the Administration proposed to restrict access to the discussion room to members of the forum and the Government bureaux/departments in order to ensure that the discussions were conducted in an orderly and appropriate manner. DSHA(1) reiterated that in order to collect the views of different sectors, the Administration would designate, out of the 600 places, 120 for candidates nominated by political parties/groups in LegCo and 90 for the academia.

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