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LegCo ITB Panel Chairman meets the press in London

The following is the opening remarks by Hon Sin Chung Kai, Chairman of the Legislative Council Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting, at a press briefing today (April 21) in London to wrap up the duty visit to Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom to study the development of public service broadcasting in these countries:

On behalf of the delegation, which comprises three members of the Information Technology and Broadcasting Panel (ITB Panel), myself, Albert Jinghan Cheng, Emily Lau and a non-Panel member of our Council, Margaret Ng, I wish to welcome you all to this press briefing which wraps up this 9-day visit to Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom to study the development of public service broadcasting in these countries.

Public service broadcasting (PSB) is a subject which our Panel has followed very closely for some time. However, the development of PSB in Hong Kong has been quite limited. Other than the services provided by our only public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) through its 7 radio channels and some allocated airtime on commercial TV channels, the Panel does not see any substantial policy on PSB and how it is going to develop to meet public expectations and demands.

In January this year, the Government set up a Review Committee to examine the justifications for PSB in the development of Hong Kong's broadcasting market, as well as its role and purposes against the resources required for such broadcasting. The Panel, being the committee of the

Legislative Council with the responsibility to monitor policies and issues on broadcasting, finds it an opportunity to conduct a study to understand the developments and trends in other places. We believe that the information we collected from this study will help us understand the experiences of these places in implementing public broadcasting and the various models in the establishment and funding of the systems and structures for public broadcasting. Although the various factors and models differ in these countries, they are the foundation stones of public broadcasting and there are also common elements, which we can make reference to in devising our own Hong Kong model. These common elements are matters such as the mechanism to keep an arm's length relationship with the government, the legal backing to provide mandate for public broadcasters, safeguards for ensuring editorial independence, providing stable funding for better planning, immunity from commercial distractions, etc. Based on our findings from this overseas visit, we shall publish a report before the end of this session with our observations and recommendations on how public service broadcasting could be implemented in Hong Kong. With the information we have acquired from this visit, we believe we shall be in a better position to give our views to the public as well as the HKSAR Government when the Review Committee comes up with its conclusions in October this year.

During the past 9 days, we visited the capital cities of Canada, the US and the UK. Through the help of the Consuls General of these countries and the Economic and Trade Offices of HKSAR in these places, we had fruitful discussions with the Government authorities with a responsibility for broadcasting, regulatory bodies, major public broadcasters, community and local channels, ombudsman and pressure groups on broadcasting and freedom of the press. We are grateful to all the organizations we met for the special efforts they made in giving us very useful presentations on their work and responding to our questions on a wide range of issues.

During our meetings with these organizations, members were particularly keen to understanding how public broadcasters are able to perform their role under the regulatory and funding structure, how they can preserve editorial independence while receiving funding support from the Government either through appropriations, grants or licence fees or from private sponsorships and commercial advertisements. We also studied the corporate governance structures and the accountability systems to ensure public money is well spent. As we only have one RTHK which is fully funded by the Government in Hong Kong, our meetings with smaller self-financed public broadcasters and community channels in these places have given us great insight on how community interests can be met through diversified services provided by a variety of broadcasters.

The delegation is very much impressed by the dedication and professionalism of the broadcasting industry in these countries and their active efforts to review and make changes to meet ongoing challenges faced by the industry and to promote high-quality local production. Digitalisation is an area which we have taken particular interest. We have also looked into services for the minority and the underprivileged.

End/Friday, April 21, 2006

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