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LCQ1: Chinese language proficiency requirements for appointment to the civil service

Following is a question by the Hon Ip Kwok-him and a reply by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Miss Denise Yue, in the Legislative Council today (January 20):

Question:

At present, the appointment requirements for most civil service posts stipulate that the applicants must meet the Chinese and English language proficiency requirements. Quite a number of Hong Kong permanent residents who are South Asians have relayed to me that they were not offered appointment to the civil service because they failed to meet the Chinese language proficiency requirements. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) among those persons applying for civil service vacancies at junior, middle and senior ranks in the recent three years, of the respective numbers of Hong Kong permanent residents of South Asian descent who had been appointed and rejected;

(b) whether any of the permanent residents of South Asian descent in (a) were not appointed solely because their Chinese language proficiency did not meet the appointment requirements; if not, of the reasons why they were not appointed; and

(c) of the details of the amendments made by the Government since the reunification in respect of the Chinese language proficiency requirements for appointment as civil servants (including expatriate civil servants) at different levels?

Reply:

President,

As stipulated in Article 9 of the Basic Law and section 3 of the Official Languages Ordinance (Cap 5), both Chinese and English are the official languages of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). While some 95% of our population are Chinese, the HKSAR is also a cosmopolitan city and a centre of trade, commerce and finance. It is the Government's policy to maintain a fully biliterate (Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) civil service to

support the HKSAR's continued development and to ensure effective communication with the general public.

Under this policy and as a general rule, all written materials meant for the public, such as government reports, forms, pamphlets, booklets, posters, notices, signs, etc., are issued in both Chinese and English. Verbal and written government announcements intended for the general public, such as radio and television advertisements and announcements made at large-scale outdoor events, as well as the Government's Internet homepages are bilingual. It is the practice of bureaux and departments (B/Ds) to reply to members of the public in either Chinese or English, depending on the language of the incoming correspondence. Frontline staff are also expected to answer enquiries and offer assistance in Cantonese, English or Putonghua. Given the importance of maintaining effective bilingual communications, it is necessary to specify the appropriate Chinese and English language proficiency requirements (LPRs) for appointments to different grades in the civil service.

Against the above backdrop, with regard to item (a) of the question, it is the aim of the Government, being an equal opportunities employer, to appoint the best person for the job on the basis of merit. Appointment to the civil service is based on open and fair competition. In assessing applicants' suitability for taking up civil service jobs, the recruiting B/Ds will take into account academic or professional qualifications, technical skills, work experience, language proficiency, and other qualities or attributes as may be required for particular jobs. Race is not a relevant consideration in the selection process. Accordingly, we do not ascertain the race of civil service job applicants in the recruitment process. Hence there is no available information on the number of Hong Kong permanent residents of South Asian descent who had been appointed to the civil service and those whose applications were unsuccessful.

With regard to part (b) of the question, as it is not our current practice to ascertain the race of civil service job applicants in the recruitment process, we do not have information on the number of permanent residents of South Asian descent who were not appointed to the civil service solely because their Chinese language proficiency did not meet the appointment requirements.

With regard to part (c) of the question, in light of the importance of the Chinese language in correspondence within the Government, especially among and for the more junior staff, and in communications with the public, Chinese language proficiency was put on par with English language proficiency for

appointment to the civil service in August 1995. Under the LPRs promulgated then, a Grade 'E' in English Language (Syllabus B) and Chinese Language in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), or equivalent, was required for entry to civil service grades that required an academic qualification at or higher than the HKCEE level. For grades that required a qualification lower than the HKCEE level, Chinese and English language proficiency at the same education level as the minimum prescribed academic qualification was required for entry to the civil service.

In January 2003, the Government raised the LPRs for appointment to the civil service having regard to the progressive improvement in education level in Hong Kong over the years and rising public expectation on the quality of the civil service. Specifically, applicants to civil service grades at degree or professional level were required to pass the two language papers (viz. Use of Chinese and Use of English) in the Common Recruitment Examination (CRE) conducted by the Civil Service Bureau (CSB), or specified public examination results. Compared to the previous language requirement which was set at a Grade 'E' at the HKCEE level for these grades, the CRE language papers are set at graduate level by language academics. Those civil service posts with entry academic qualification requirements set at below degree level were required to attain a Grade 'E' in English Language (Syllabus B) and Chinese Language in the HKCEE, or equivalent, unless the grade concerned has obtained prior approval for exemption from the CSB.

In October 2006, the Government modified the LPRs to cater for different language requirements based on job requirements. Under the revised LPRs which are still in force, a two-tier passing mechanism for each of the two CRE language papers is put in place for degree or professional grades. Having regard to the job requirements of individual grades, the concerned Heads of Department or Heads of Grade (HoDs/HoGs) may decide whether candidates should attain 'Level 2' or 'Level 1' in each of the two CRE language papers, and the same level need not be prescribed for the two languages if there is no such need to do so from a job requirement point of view. As regards non-degree grades with academic qualification requirements set at or above the HKCEE level, applicants should attain a Grade 'E' or 'Level 2' in English Language and Chinese Language in the HKCEE, or equivalent. For example, a Grade 'C' in the English Language (Syllabus A) HKCEE paper is accepted as an equivalent of a Grade 'E' in the Syllabus B paper. Other overseas or local academic attainments are considered on a case-by-case basis. In respect of non-degree grades with academic qualification requirements below the HKCEE level, LPRs are aligned with the minimum academic qualification laid down for the grades

concerned. Regarding grades that do not have any prescribed academic qualification, LPRs are set at a level that is commensurate with the job requirements.

With effect from August 8, 2007, the Government accepts Chinese Language results in International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), UK General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and General Certificate of Education 'Ordinary' Level (GCE 'O' Level) for civil service appointment purpose. Specifically, we accept a Grade 'C' in these overseas examinations' Chinese paper as equivalent to a 'Level 3' in the HKCEE Chinese Language, and a Grade 'D' as equivalent to a 'Level 2' in the HKCEE Chinese Language.

HoDs/HoGs may apply to the CSB for exemptions from the stipulated LPRs on a case-by-case basis if they encounter recruitment difficulties.

Thank you, President.

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