

**Extract of minutes of meeting of the LegCo Panel on Constitutional
Affairs
on 15 January 2001**

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Action

V. Enhancing the role and functions of the District Councils
(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)207/00-01(04), 270/00-01(03), 535/00-01(03) and 651/00-01(06))

23. Acting Secretary for Constitutional Affairs (SCA(Ag)) said that during the resumption of the Second Reading debate on the Provision of Municipal Services (Reorganization) Bill, the Administration advised Members that after the new District Councils (DCs) had commenced operation, it would consider how to enhance the role of the DCs in district affairs and strengthen their functions. Since the establishment of the DCs on 1 January 2000, progressive steps had been taken by the Administration towards that direction. On 14 November 2000, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) briefed the Panel on Home Affairs about the measures that had been taken to enhance the role and functions of the DCs and the support provided to DC members. A District Administration Seminar was organized on 18 November 2000 to solicit views of DC members on the operation of the DCs and areas for improvement. Members had also expressed views by way of a motion debate on "Increasing the support to DC members" held at the Council meeting on 22 November 2000.

24. Deputy Secretary for Home Affairs (DS/HA) supplemented that since the DCs had operated for more than a year, it was the right time to conduct a review. An inter-departmental working group, headed by the HAB and comprised representatives of the relevant bureaux and departments including the Constitutional Affairs Bureau, had been formed to review how to further enhance the role and functions of the DCs and strengthen the support for DC members. The Administration had previously provided a paper (LC Paper No. CB(2)207/00-01(04)) setting out the measures that had been taken so far. The Administration welcomed views from members of the Panel.

Revamp of the DC structure

25. Dr YEUNG Sum said that he had read from a news report that there were plans to re-delineate the boundaries of the 18 DCs into five or six DCs. He asked the Administration whether the review was working in that direction and if so, he suggested that the matter should be considered from a macroscopic and constitutional perspective. He opined that giving the DCs more powers and responsibilities would attract more people to participate in the

Action
Column

work of the DCs.

26. Deputy Secretary for Constitutional Affairs (DS/CA) said that prior to the drafting of the District Councils Bill in 1999, the Administration had conducted public consultation in 1998 to gather views on, among others, the functions and structure of the municipal councils and the District Boards. The majority of the responses received was that the number and structure of the District Boards should be retained. Since the DCs had been in operation for just more than a year, it was considered inopportune to make any fundamental and major changes to the structure of the DCs at this stage. A more pragmatic approach was to review the role and functions of the DCs on the basis of the existing structure.

27. In response to the Chairman, DS/HA clarified that the delineation of the DC boundaries was outside the scope of the current review. So far, no DC had suggested that it would like to be amalgamated with another DC.

Motions passed by DCs

28. In the light of his experience as a DC member, Mr James TIEN said that the DCs passed a lot of motions. He asked about the procedure in handling motions passed by the DCs and the level of government officials responsible for following up the motions. He had the feeling that only officials at junior level would handle such motions. Mr TIEN also commented that although the DCs were consulted on proposals relating to district affairs beforehand, the views of DC members were often ignored and inadequately reflected in papers submitted to LegCo. The Chairman said that it would appear that while the Administration was prepared to listen to the views of DC members, no regard was paid to their views in formulation of policies.

29. Assistant Director for Home Affairs (AD/HA), who was a former District Officer of the Eastern District, advised members that after a motion was carried at a DC meeting, the DC secretariat would convey the motion to the relevant policy bureau or department in writing. Any reply received would be passed on to the DC. If members of the DC were dissatisfied with the reply, they could pursue the matter further with the Administration. As regards consultation with the DCs, AD/HA said that views of a DC on a particular issue would be reflected in the relevant paper submitted to the relevant committee/council.

30. As regards the level of officials responsible for handling motions passed by the DCs, AD/HA said that the referral of the DC secretariat would be addressed to the relevant policy secretary or head of department. While he did not have any information in hand as to the level of officials who would be handling DC motions in respective policy bureaux and departments, he pointed out that the reply given to the DC secretariat was signed on behalf of the relevant policy secretary/head of department. Mr TIEN asked whether the officer signing off the letter was the one responsible for handling the motion. AD/HA replied that this was not necessarily the case as the motion might have been dealt with or considered by other officers at more senior level.

31. DS/HA supplemented that the level of officials assigned to follow up on DC motions would depend on the nature of the motions and their implications. She said that she had recently handled a motion passed by the Eastern DC. The motion proposed that the DCs should be consulted on policies affecting the livelihood of the people such as increase in government fees and charges. Given the implications of the motion, she had personally taken up the matter with the Finance Bureau.

Scope of the review

32. Mr IP Kwok-him said that some DC members were not satisfied with the advisory role of the DCs. They considered that some of the functions of the former municipal councils should be handed over to the DCs. They also wanted to have an enhanced role in district affairs management and policy formulation. Mr IP asked the Administration whether the review being conducted was working towards that direction.

33. DS/HA said that the review was meant to see how the role and functions of the DCs could be enhanced. In this regard, the Administration welcomed concrete suggestions from Members, the DCs and the public on what powers or functions should be devolved to the DCs. In response to Ms Emily LAU's question on timing, DS/HA said that the Administration had undertaken to complete the review within 2001.

34. Ms Emily LAU said that the morale of some DC members was low because they felt that their views were not respected by the Administration and they were not provided with adequate resources to discharge their duties. If the Administration was prepared to give substantive powers to the DCs, it should make clear its intention so that the public and DC members would be more ready to give concrete proposals in this respect for the consideration of the Administration.

35. Miss Margaret NG said that the Administration must have some preliminary views on how further powers could be devolved to the DCs when it proposed to abolish the municipal councils in 1998. Given that the DCs had already operated for a year and to facilitate discussion by all interested parties, the Administration should make known its preliminary views or proposals on the issue.

36. SCA(Ag) said that the Secretary for Constitutional Affairs (SCA) had made the following comments when speaking during the Third Reading of the Provision of Municipal Services (Reorganization) Bill -

"...During the Second Reading debate, some Members expressed support for the streamlining of the three-tier system of representative government into a two-tier structure. At the same time, they hope that the Government can strengthen the functions and representativeness of

District Councils. After the commencement of the first term of District Councils of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region next year, we will work in this direction to promote the development of district organizations, and consider ways to enhance the role of District Councils in district affairs and to strengthen their functions."

SCA(Ag) added that the Administration had now followed up the matter by conducting a comprehensive review of the functions of the DCs. He reiterated that the Administration was open-minded about the review. In response to Ms Emily LAU, DS/CA reiterated that the review would be conducted on the basis that the existing structure of the DCs would remain unchanged.

37. DS/HA said that the Administration was working in partnership with the DCs on the review. The Administration would consider the views of the DCs and consult them on the proposals made before implementation. However, the Administration was not in a position to put forward any preliminary views on the issue at this stage. As the District Administration Seminar and the motion debate of the Council were only held in November 2000, the Administration would need some time to study the views expressed and to discuss the feasibility of certain proposals with the relevant departments before it could come up with any preliminary views.

38. The Chairman asked whether the proposal to give more decision-making powers to the DCs would be considered in the review.

39. DS/HA said that under section 61 of the District Councils Ordinance, the DCs were advisory bodies. One of the objectives of the review was to study how the functions of the DCs could be enhanced so that they could play a part in promoting culture, recreation and environmental affairs and in providing such services, which were areas of responsibility of the former municipal councils.

40. DS/CA supplemented that the DCs were advisory bodies by virtue of Article 97 of the Basic Law which stated that "District organizations which are not organs of political power may be established in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, to be consulted by the government of the Region on district administration and other affairs, or to be responsible for providing services in such fields as culture, recreation and environmental sanitation". Hence, the scope of the review should follow the principles laid down in Article 97.

41. Ms Emily LAU said that an advisory body did not have any substantive powers. In the circumstances, she could not see how the role and functions of the DCs could be enhanced after the review. Miss Margaret NG asked whether it was the intention of the Administration to review whether the "advisory" role and functions of the DCs could be enhanced.

42. Mr SZETO Wah pointed out that the term “district organizations” stipulated in Article 97 referred to both the municipal councils and DCs. Following the abolition of the two councils, their functions should be transferred to the remaining district organizations, the DCs. He held the view that failure to do so would contravene Article 97.

43. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong held the view that given that district organizations were empowered under Article 97 to provide services in such fields as culture, recreation and environmental sanitation, they should also have the powers to decide on the policies and budget, etc for providing such services.

44. Dr YEUNG Sum said that the DCs should be given decision-making powers on local and district affairs. He was dissatisfied that the Administration was equivocal about the issue.

45. Miss Cyd HO recalled that at a meeting of the Panel on Home Affairs, members had raised the question of whether the role of DCs could go beyond the scope of an advisory body. Mr LAM Woon-kwong, the Secretary for Home Affairs had said that all issues could be discussed in the review, including any amendments to the Districts Council Ordinance. It would appear that the Administration had adopted two different positions on the matter.

46. Miss Margaret NG advised members that on a previous occasion, Members had raised the question as to whether the abolition of the municipal councils amounted to reducing the powers of the district organizations. The Administration's response was that under Article 97, district organizations could be established for two purposes, i.e. either to be consulted on district administration or to be responsible for providing services in such fields as culture, recreation and environmental sanitation, and that given the DCs were consultative bodies on district administration, there was no question of their powers being reduced.

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47. The Chairman said that the Administration had on one hand advised the Panel that it would listen to the views of the DCs and Members before finalizing the review, but on the other hand had already held a position on certain issues. He asked the Administration to provide a paper to the Panel to clarify the scope and direction of the review and how the Administration proposed to proceed with the review. In particular, he would like the Administration to clarify whether proposals such as empowering the DCs to become a decision-making body with financial autonomy in district affairs could be covered in the review.

48. DS/HA said that the Administration was not in a position to advise members of any concrete proposals at this stage as the review had just commenced. On the scope of the review, the Administration was of the view that it should not exceed the parameter of Article 97. The Administration

Action
Column

believed that the term “district organizations” in Article 97 referred to the former municipal councils and District Boards. While the functions of the municipal councils could be transferred to the DCs in principle, the Administration would need to study what functions in respect of district affairs should be transferred, and if so, how. These issues would be addressed in the review. SCA(Ag) reiterated that the Administration would carry out the review in a liberal and open-minded manner.

49. Miss Margaret NG suggested that members should discuss among themselves how the matter should be taken forward, and that LegCo should consider exchanging views with the DCs on this issue. Members agreed that an internal discussion on the subject should be held at the next meeting.

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