

Grooming Political Talents and Developing Political Parties

"Proposal to Grooming Political Talents" - press release

July 12, 2005

In response to the Second Report (April 2004) of the Constitutional Development Task Force which suggested that the experience and caliber of political talent was crucial to democratic development of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Democratic Development Network (DDN) had spent six months to study the issue and released a report yesterday on how political talents could be groomed. The political group maintained that reforming the civil service, district-level administration, policy research and consultative bodies would be necessary. But above all, the group urged the development of political party.

Rev. Yiu-ming Chu, Chairman of DDN, criticized the government of using political talents as an excuse to delay universal suffrage. Rev. Chu urged the government to build the "political infrastructure" for democracy by expanding opportunities of political participation and grooming political talents.

Prof. Joseph Chan of HKU Politics and Public Administration Department who is also the convener of DDN's Political Talents Study Group argued that a fundamental cause of the governance problems in Hong Kong was the imbalanced development of our political system, which was characterized by a lack of cooperation between the executive and the legislative branches, highly dispersed allocation of policy research resources and a chaotic policy making process. "If the political system in Hong Kong is to function effectively, a governing team which faces the public and "moves with the times" would be indispensable", said Professor Chan. The group contended that Administrative Officers (AOs) were not well positioned to be the core of this governing team. Instead, Hong Kong should seek to strengthen the policy research capacity and public administration experience of political parties, who should become the core of the future governing team. The group urged opening up more channels for political parties to participate in the policy process and train future leaders, not only of their parties but also of the government.

One of the study group members Prof. Wilson Wong of CUHK Government and Public Administration pointed out that the AO system exhibited important defects in playing the role as the core policy maker. These included, among other things, the lack of specialized expertise and accountability. He proposed that, as democratization proceeded, the policymaking power should gradually be transferred to the political parties, who would ultimately take up the role to govern. In the short run, new postings like assistants to principal officials and deputy bureau secretaries could be introduced. Meanwhile, the AO system

should move from the “generalist” tradition towards specialization, recruiting more outside professionals who can formulate and promote government policies more effectively.

Another group member Ivan Choy of CUHK Government and Public Administration suggested four institutional reforms to encourage parties to develop their capacities: (1) giving parties a chance to govern; (2) providing more financial support for political parties in campaigning and policy research; (3) setting up party-friendly electoral rules, such as more free air-time during elections and (4) introducing political party law to lay down parties’ rights and responsibilities.

The report also proposed to reform district-level administration so as to facilitate the grooming of political talents by: (1) setting up regional governments, (2) decentralization of power from the central (SAR) government and (3) developing grass root democracy.

Prof. Ma Ngok of UST Social Science Division suggested the SAR government relocate its internal resources for policy research and strengthen the Central Policy Unit (CPU) so that it would play a major role in long-term and inter-departmental policy research. Meanwhile, more resources should also be channeled to the Research and Library Services Division of the LegCo. He also proposed establishing a “Public Policy Research Fund” to finance policy research by political parties, think tanks and universities; the government could first launch a seed grant which would then invite contributions from the private sector. Such financial support should be coupled with more collaboration among government, academics and civil society think tanks. This could be done through regular secondment of academics and other expertise into government departments and the CPU.

Joe Yau, a Ph.D. candidate at HKU Computer Science, suggested the government to review the functions of the consultative bodies and sought to increase their accountability and transparency, as well as participation by the public. Four specific proposals were made: (1) limiting membership of consultative bodies to a maximum of four (instead of six) per individual; (2) setting up schemes for evaluating members’ performance; (3) establishing a public service monitoring commission similar to those in the UK and Canada and (4) developing functional groups under these bodies to allow more outsider participation.

DDN sent out the proposal to the Chief Executive Donald Tsang yesterday and expected a positive response from the government. The group would also initiate discussion with local political parties to follow up the numerous suggestions made in the report. Interested parties could also visit the group's website (www.hkddn.org) to browse the report.