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**Speech by the Hon Mrs Selina Chow Liang Shuk-Yee, JP
Motion Debate on Promoting Community Spirit, 27 February 2002**

Selina Chow:

Madam President, with the economy in the doldrums and restructuring progressing, social changes in Hong Kong are rapid. Inevitably, this will bring about a lot of social and family problems. As mentioned in the original motion, the sluggish economy makes people live under immense pressure and a host of social problems arise. I think this is a concern shared by all Honourable Members.

The original motion suggests the Government to actively promote the development of the third sector, so as to make more civilian groups organize more community mutual aid programmes at their own initiative and to promote mutual support in the community. The Liberal Party supports such a policy direction for if government efforts in this respect are done well, not only will the life of the people be improved, but their sense of belonging to the community can be enhanced too. The financial burden of the Government in terms of welfare expenditure can be eased as well.

Take the example of the time voucher system put on trial by the St. James Settlement in Wan Chai, the residents there can offer their skills to serve other residents and they can exchange goods and services in return on an equal basis. This kind of self-help scheme can foster a sense of partnership and mutual support among the residents and make them more self-reliant. This will in the end ease government burden in terms of welfare spending and of manpower and other resources.

Therefore, the Liberal Party is of the view that the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund as proposed by the Chief Executive in last year's policy address is a good idea. The objective of setting up the Fund is to give priority funding to schemes which foster participation in community affairs, and those which target at the grass-roots neighbourhoods and the disadvantaged social groups with a view to improving community services. This move made by the Government is the first and a vital step in promoting the development of the third sector.

It goes without saying that the Liberal Party hopes that the Government can start its work in respect of the Fund at the soonest, but we are also concerned about the practical results which this Fund can bring. For in the past the Government has made grants to set up various funds, but it is doubtful whether these funds are well spent and have met the targets they have set out to achieve. So in the view of the Liberal Party, the

authorities concerned should try to perfect the operational details and supervision of the Fund so that the money can be spent in the best way.

Madam President, during the past 10 years or so when our society made such tremendous progress and when a lot of social capital accumulated, our investment on social welfare and social services increased as well. We are talking about a great need. But growth in this respect should not be something taken for granted. We all understand that any form of excessive welfarism will only undermine the competitiveness of a society.

Over the past few years, government spending on welfare rose from \$14.1 billion in the year 1996-97 to \$29.8 billion in the year 2000-01. The growth in welfare spending during this five-year period has been amazing and this also shows welfare spending has become a heavy burden on society.

We are now facing a serious budget deficit crisis. Things have become different from what we used to have in the past. Can we now add more funding to each and every kind of social service without ever giving serious thoughts to it? In such circumstances, the Liberal Party thinks that besides trying to improve community services, the Government should also make a serious review of the existing resources, to see whether they are fully utilized and how they can be redeployed to ensure that the kinds of social services which are in most urgent need can be accorded priority in the allocation of resources. This will also ensure that public resources used in the provision of social services are all put to the best use.

For this reason, the Liberal Party has some reservations about the motion moved by Mr TAM Yiu-chung today. Our opposition has nothing to do with the work or the objectives proposed. It is due to Mr TAM's mention of the need to increase resources. If it is said that resources are to be deployed so that they can be used more effectively, then we will surely not raise any objection. But Mr TAM's motion clearly states that additional resources are to be allocated, so the Liberal Party has reservations about that. As the Government now faces shrinking revenue in many respects and its efforts in cutting expenditure have not been that effective, so if we want to increase spending to improve the provision of services, I think we will ask, "Is this a real wolf or a fake wolf?" We may have to face a wolf which is growing in size. I believe that will impact even more seriously on society ultimately.

I so submit.