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**Speech by the Hon Mrs Selina Chow Liang Shuk-ye, GBS, JP
Motion Debate on That this Council supports the accountability
system for principal officials, 30 May 2002**

Selina Chow:

Madam President, as the Member with the longest history of service in this Chamber, I feel obliged to speak on the resolution proposed today, for it is an important milestone in the entire political development of Hong Kong. I would like to talk about two kinds of views, one being that of the Liberal Party and the other my own.

The party platform of the Liberal Party as it was founded states very clearly that we strongly support the setting up of an accountability system. We called this a ministerial system and it is quite the same as the accountability system before us now. We are of the view that Hong Kong is no longer a colony and after 1997, our Government and our senior officials should not be accountable to the Legislative Council alone, but also to the people of Hong Kong. The British Hong Kong Government used to be answerable to the Queen, and the SAR Government we have now should not be accountable to the Chief Executive and the Central Government only, but also to the people of Hong Kong. In the present circumstances, we know that the present system does not work and we have made a lot of criticisms on countless issues and I think Members will realize these when they look up the records. However, I do not know why some Honourable Members still insist on maintaining the existing system despite the numerous criticisms made against it. This will simply not work.

Mr LEE Cheuk-yan accused the public earlier, saying that the public did not understand what was being asked in the survey, so they agreed to the accountability system. I do not agree to this view, for the people have a discerning mind. For over the past few years, they could see that the various institutions of the Government were not working. Why? The civil servants are now having a very miserable time. When they were appointed to the service, they were told to be politically neutral and to follow the established rules and practices. But things are different now. They are required to come to the Legislative Council to offer explanations, and they have to defend government policies in public. If their performance is unsatisfactory, we will not be happy and think that they should bear the political responsibilities. But in fact they cannot do so, for they are civil servants. So a system like this absolutely does not work. It is only natural that power and responsibility should be linked together. In other words, the policy makers should be answerable to their policy decisions. That includes the implementation of policies. Therefore, we think that as a first step the political figures should bear

the responsibility of policy formulation and then they should also bear the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of their policies. Then if they fail, they should be dismissed. I think in general Members would agree to that.

Since we all agree that the existing system does not work, we hope that the Government can change it. So when the Chief Executive announced that the system would be changed, the Liberal Party supported the idea very much. We think that not only should changes be made, but that they should be made quickly. Take the example of a large company, if the top management has some important staff changes, the operations at the lower levels will be suspended. Honourable Members who have a close working relationship with the Government would have noted that this situation has emerged in our Government now. Many officials are not willing to make any decisions on some important issues and that is understandable because they are going to have a new boss. The new boss may have some entirely different views and he or she may launch a lot of new initiatives and so they are reluctant to make any major decisions on behalf of their bosses. That is why a lot of work has been delayed, regardless of their importance. Given the circumstances, if we are still arguing over the accountability system, then what good does it do to Hong Kong?

So the Liberal Party thinks that a clear-cut and comprehensive plan should be proposed for everybody to think about it. That should of course also include issues like the candidates, for that is our concern. We are unable to lend our support to the amendment moved by Mr Martin LEE. What does Mr LEE's amendment seek to achieve? His amendment is in fact tantamount to not supporting the present accountability system. The kind of accountability system his party has in mind is a system of their own, but when can such a system appear? I do not know, it may be many years from now. It would be much better if he could just say that he does not support such a system. Why does he keep on sidetracking and beating about the bush? He is trying to turn the issue under discussion to something of his own choice. That would not help at all. It would not help us solve the present problem, so we are unable to support his amendment.

Having said that, we would not just rashly pass the motion and finish the matter off. We appreciate the efforts made by Honourable Members, especially the Subcommittee chaired by Mr IP Kwok-him, as well as the government officials, for spending so much time to complete the task at such a short time. They have helped us and other Honourable Members who are not members of the Subcommittee understand the many issues involved. The Government has made some changes to its original plan and merges some Policy Bureaux and that is a good thing. For the Government has reconsidered its original plan, but some Honourable Members have criticized the Government for making frequent changes. It is only natural that changes should be made to the original plan when some deficiencies are found, although this may not satisfy all

Honourable Members. Miss CHOY So-yuk, for example, may not be happy about it. Though the finalized reorganization of the bureaux may not make everyone happy, it is not made without any justification. Now we are about to have a new system in place and as some Honourable colleagues have said, this is a start and we support making the start as soon as possible. We know that it is not possible to make things perfect. For we are having a new system, a new plan and we cannot guarantee that all things will fit snugly. But if we can score 80 out of 100, that would be good enough.

We cannot put off something when it cannot get everyone's consent, nor can we say that it cannot be done. The most important thing is that the Government will be able to exercise its authority and be responsible to work for the benefit of Hong Kong. What the Government must do is to take into account the views of Members and the public and then make a decision. I am convinced that when such a monumental and innovative change is to be made, there are some factors which must be considered and borne in mind.

I think Members are all concerned about the candidates under the new system. Can these people do their jobs well and meet our expectations? On this question of appointing candidates for the job, I believe we will soon know whether the candidates are capable of doing their job well. I think the pressure is now on the Chief Executive in choosing the right candidates. I do not agree with some Honourable colleagues who say that the Chief Executive merely finds some people to fill up the offices or that he will just pick some of his trusted aides. Just imagine if he can pass the scrutiny of his conscience and that of the public if he does that. Moreover, he cannot just nominate some people for the job. For they will have to work for him for five years and they have to deliver. Only irresponsible people will say such remarks. No responsible people will ever say such things. So as to this question of candidates, we hope that some capable people can be appointed and these people should have the commitment to work for the people of Hong Kong. They should have some track record in the field for which they are appointed. They do not have to come from the business sector, the political circle or the Government. Their origin is not important. The most important thing is their capabilities. I think that is what the people would like to see.

Besides, I think we want to see an esprit de corps. We know that there will be changes to the Executive Council and a team will emerge. The Directors of Bureaux will work with the Chief Executive in formulating policies and overseeing their implementation. Personally I would very much hope to see an esprit de corps there and I think that this team should work towards striking a balance of the interests of all parties. We have to realize that it is just impossible to make everyone happy all the time, but at least a proper balance of all interests should be struck and that should be acceptable to all. In the past, whenever we pointed out that some Policy Secretaries had done something wrong, they would put up the shield of collective accountability and say that the decision was

not their own and it was made collectively. We do not like to hear officials putting up such an excuse and we do not like to see this situation continue. In the future, each accountability Bureau Director will be responsible for his or her own portfolio and that may have some risks. For if the Bureau Directors are responsible for their own portfolio and if they do not want to make any compromise, a balance may be difficult to strike. Recently, we can see some examples that these officials will not make any compromise even when the issue at hand is made public. In this regard, I hope that the future esprit de corps will lead to a state of affairs more favourable than the present one in which individual Policy Secretaries do not put up such a satisfactory performance.

In addition, we would like to see that the new team of leaders may forge a good working relationship among themselves and also with the Legislative Council and the public. The team should therefore adopt an open mentality and team members must listen to public opinion. They must not confine themselves to making good public relations efforts. For what is involved is a question of having the right mentality, of really listening to the voices of the people. If they have given their thoughts to some good advice, they would also need the support of the Executive Council and the Chief Executive, without which they cannot take their policies forward.

We know that the number of Bureau Directors in the Executive Council will be more than that of non-executive Members. Therefore, I believe that Members of the Executive Council who are not Bureau Directors should make use of the opportunity to define their responsibilities clearly. As a matter of fact, they will play an important role, and that is, to communicate with this Council and they cannot just sit there and play their role of unofficial Members. If this is what they will be doing, I do not think they can help in serving as a bridge between the executive and the legislature.

As to the question of which Policy Bureaux should be merged with which other bureaux or split from which ones, as I have said earlier, a conclusion can be reached only after some time when we know who will be the candidates. But we think that the structure after repeated revisions by the Government is acceptable. There are some views that the promotion of some serving Policy Secretaries as accountability Bureau Directors is not appropriate, but we do not think there should be any problems with this. If they are civil servants, they should change their mentality for by then they will become political figures and not civil servants any more. The way in which they handle things will be very different from now and they should not merely cling to past practices and seek the advice of consultants on every matter. We hope to see Bureau Directors have greater autonomy in future and that more time and money can be saved as they put their policies into practice. We would also like to see a new culture developed in the Government as a result of these new leaders. Although their number is very small, they

take up vital positions in the Government. So we would very much hope that they will change the existing civil service culture which in our opinion is not that desirable. We would also hope that certain problems will not appear again, for example, those associated with organizations like the former Municipal Councils and the Housing Authority which are not part of the Government but are nevertheless run by civil servants. Thank you, Madam President.