

2002.6.5

**Speech by the Hon Mrs Selina Chow Liang Shuk-ye, GBS, JP  
Motion Debate on Solving the Problem of "Prolonged Immigration  
and Customs Clearance", 5 June 2002**

Selina Chow:

Madam President, I am very grateful to the two Members who showed such an accurate grasp of the question that the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) is most concerned about. All the figures they cited are absolutely correct. I believe the greatest concern of this Council is the departure needs of Hong Kong people. While the confusion in most cases is but a long-standing problem and does not arise only recently, it appears that there is a need for the problem to be urgently addressed.

Of course, we also care about mainland travellers visiting Hong Kong. Indeed, there has been a surge of mainland visitors within a short time, and this is an irrefutable fact. This year, in particular, we have seen a three-fold increase. Apart from the figures cited earlier, I wish to make some additions. Of the mainland visitors who came to Hong Kong in 2001 as mentioned by the two Members, three quarters of them actually came through land and sea crossings, while only one fourth travelled by air. In other words, nearly 3 million visitors came to Hong Kong through land crossings last year. The number of visitors to Hong Kong will triple this year, and as we can see, 1.9 million visitors have come in four months, and the greatest increase was registered in the number of visitors who came through land crossings. Therefore, no doubt we must improve the arrangements in various areas, especially the arrangements at the land boundary control points.

I am certainly in favour of solving the problem once and for all. In the long term, the co-location of immigration and clearance facilities is no doubt the ideal solution. Not only will this provide greater convenience to travellers, it will also be more economical in terms of the utilization of resources. To achieve this objective, we certainly have to expeditiously reach a consensus with the Shenzhen Government. I hope the Secretary will give us a timetable, since it is learnt that the Government is also very supportive of this measure and has already made certain effort. But since it is such an urgent matter, we hope that a timetable could be provided.

I was also very glad to hear the Honourable Jasper TSANG say that he would support requests made by the Government whether in respect of legislation or resources. I am sure that in the long term, the co-location of immigration and clearance facilities could bring about a lot of advantages and both governments will stand to gain. If efficiency can be improved and co-operation between both sides fostered, it will generate

more economic benefits and provide convenience to the residents.

From another point of view, apart from the co-location of immigration and clearance facilities, other long-term measures may also be helpful to the arrangements for practical operations. Since we can foresee a continued increase in the number of mainland visitors (we also hope that the number will continue to increase and not drop), we hope that the visitors during the so-called "golden holiday week" can be spread out more evenly, that is, mainland visitors who are increasing in number will not just come during the "golden week". If they can be spread out more evenly, it will result in fewer peak periods at the border control points. Then the problem that we face during the Chinese New Year holiday and the 1 May Labour Day holiday would not be intensified. It would be better if more visitors could come at other times. Of course, this would depend on the arrangements of travel agencies and promotional campaigns by other quarters. The HKTb could also play a part, since our promotional efforts should not concentrate too much on certain holidays. As far as I know, the promotional campaigns of the HKTb will cover rather long periods. For instance, the Mega Hong Kong Sale from June to August will last 11 weeks. We hope to attract more mainland visitors to stay in Hong Kong for a longer period of time so that arrangements can be made for them to spend their holidays in Hong Kong.

In the short term, we need to implement some measures right away, for some long holidays will be coming before the full implementation of the co-location of immigration and clearance facilities and certain other measures. For instance, the First of July and National Day holidays, and even the Chinese New Year holiday next year, and the problem that we have encountered this year may recur during these holidays. We need to review the chaos during the golden holiday week starting from 1 May and find out where the problem lies. After a more detailed analysis, we find that it all boils down to two main problems: first, the surge in the number of visitors; second, the arrival of visitors almost at the same time. The problem was especially serious on 1 May because the majority of visitors arrived in the morning of 1 May, something that we had never expected. We knew that there would be many visitors, but we never thought there would be so many of them. This may be due to some communication problems. I believe the travel agencies have the duty to make better arrangements and it is necessary to deploy additional manpower. I know that the liaison between the travel agencies and the Immigration Department on the visitors' lists this time still leaves a lot to be desired. I hope that improvements can be made in future. I also hope that the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong and the China National Tourism Administration will provide assistance as far as possible.

As for the facilities, even though the permanent facilities cannot be completed in time, temporary facilities can still help ease the pressure and make travellers more comfortable.

