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**Speech by the Hon Mrs Selina Chow Liang Shuk-ye, GBS, JP
Motion Debate on The Accountability System for Principal Officials,
19 June 2002**

Selina Chow:

Madam President, I am not going to repeat the points made by Members of the Liberal Party. I just wish to state that the Liberal Party supports the direction and the current development of the accountability system for principal officials. In the last motion debate on this topic, I mentioned indeed many reasons to explain why we support it. We do not only support it. We also hope that the accountability system can be implemented expeditiously and so, we support this resolution.

We do not consider that all the elements contained in this system or resolution are perfect, which is impossible. This is only the start now. To the Government or Hong Kong as a whole, this is a very new attempt. Any new attempt will involve some measure of risks. But it does not mean that we should hold ourselves back from making this new attempt because of such risks. Indeed, we know it only too well that there is a very strong consensus not just in this Chamber, but also in the community at large, that a government led by non-accountable senior civil servants cannot be allowed to go on any longer and changes are therefore warranted, and soon. Regarding a point made by Honourable colleagues earlier about insufficient time for the scrutiny process, I very much agree with what Mr IP Kwok-him had said. We certainly have to perform our duties, but the realistic circumstances sometimes may not be totally ideal. As we work in this world, we often have to consider the realistic needs as well as the time. We, Members of this Council, have been working very hard, and I do respect Members who have been hardworking. While many Members are very dissatisfied with the timeframe, they have done their utmost in their work. But I just do not agree that we should give a thumbs-down to the resolution because we were not given sufficient time.

Members have often questioned the soundness of such a structure. As I said earlier on, any framework of this sort is basically very complex and requires constant review and improvement. Let us not talk about Hong Kong. Even in the United Kingdom, environmental protection and transport matters are merged only in recent years. Why? It is because the development of society warrants such a change. A more recent example is the proposal by the President of the United States, George W. BUSH, to set up a federal domestic security office. This is certainly in response to the need arising from anti-terrorism and the September 11 incident. He proposed to the Congress the establishment of this new department, and the Congress was poised to support him even before the scrutiny of

this proposal. This is a general direction. They, as a nation, are obviously united in this objective. So, I think we must learn as we work. Certainly, I understand that some colleagues considered that we must start in a correct way. But given the present situation and after discussions, we generally think that this can be a framework to start with. As to whether improvements are necessary at a later stage, I do not rule out this possibility and in this connection, transparency is very important. Moreover, we must keep a close watch on it, particularly at the outset. It is because if it can keep on operating and after more hands-on experience has been obtained or after proper adjustments are made in many areas, constant changes may no longer be necessary.

Having said that, however, with regard to the Government's approach in handling the whole issue, I must express my personal dissatisfaction. I am not making this comment in my capacity as the Chairman of the House Committee, because I have not consulted the House Committee. This is just my personal observation. In the course of scrutiny, we had constantly heard colleagues express dissatisfaction because government officials had not properly answered questions raised by them. In fact, the officials should have explained to us that this is just a new beginning, that we must learn from experience, and that some of the arrangements are actually there now, only that they will now be passed onto some new accountable officials for further improvement. Had they taken this attitude, I trust that many colleagues would have found the proposal more worthy of acceptance. But they have not taken this attitude. We heard some officials say that they did not have the answers and that Members might have to ask the future Bureau Directors. I think it is very difficult for the Legislative Council to accept this kind of attitude.

But in all fairness, we should not put all the blame on Secretary Michael SUEN. Now that the Government has proposed this accountability system. The three Principal Secretaries and the Chief Executive may have to think about this: Why were Secretary Michael SUEN and other officials, such as officials from the Education and Manpower Bureau, being put in a rather difficult position in which they had to come before the Legislative Council to answer questions? Why did the Government not give them some help and let them know a bit more, so that they could answer Members' questions when they were here? I think the Government should review this point. It is because after all, we hope that the Government can nurture a very healthy relationship between the executive and the legislature. But how can we build up such a relationship? There must be dialogues and respect. So, I must register my disappointment at Mr TUNG Chee-hwa not coming to the Legislative Council to explain to us the accountability system at the earliest opportunity. I understand that all officials under the accountability system will have to be appointed by the Central People's Government, and I trust few Members would question this. We will respect this. Furthermore, this is also mentioned in the Basic Law. But after their appointment, they must face the Legislative Council, because every Bureau Director will have to come to the Legislative Council

sooner or later and face the panels or other committees. If they can start out positively and proactively, and establish a good relationship with the Legislative Council, it will indeed be very helpful to their work in future.

I very much hope that as soon as the system starts to work, Mr TUNG and the new Bureau Directors — some of whom have never set foot in this Chamber before, if the press reports are correct — can come to the Legislative Council. This will be a good start for us and for them as well. As I have just said, the relationship between the executive and the legislature is founded on mutual respect and communication. We often hear officials say that their view of coming to the Legislative Council is very negative, for they will only expect a dressing down by Members and they will rarely expect praises by Members. That is true. Few Members will give praises to officials.

Honestly, I do not quite identify with those Members who like only to scold people. But to the Government, I believe it is most important to appreciate that irrespective of the attitude of Members or whether their comments are well-justified, this is still the hall of a parliamentary assembly, and Members must have reasons in making those comments. Being a responsible government, it is imperative that after listening to all the views on each issue, it can filter the views and take on board the best views for incorporation into government policies, working in concert with this Council for public interest. I think the spirit of checks and balances and mutual co-operation is the most important. So, if we are not on good terms with each other, and if officials are in a cold sweat whenever they think of the Legislative Council and Members get hot under the collar at the sight of officials, then it would be utterly difficult for discussions to be conducted in a completely objective manner. Please bear in mind that we are actually working together to serve the same community.

Some Members said earlier on that the South Korean soccer team is gorgeous indeed. But let us not lose sight of the patriotic spirit of the South Korean soccer team and the South Koreans. On the contrary, how much do Hong Kong people and this Chamber love Hong Kong? We should indeed work together and should not move farther and farther apart from one another. But faced with this big change, I have the feeling that it has already pulled us farther apart. This, I think, is somewhat unfortunate. But to the Liberal Party, we are always positive and look ahead. Although our perspectives and standpoints are different, and we often have different positions — it is only natural that there are many different positions among Members — we can still join hands and work for the benefit of Hong Kong. Then why can we not join hands with the Government or officials under the accountability system?

I very much hope that the Government will seriously review this to enable the accountability system to truly make a good start, so that this new system can become a genuine system of accountability. Thank you.

Madam President.