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Speech by the Hon Mrs Selina Chow Liang Shuk-ye, GBS, JP Motion Debate on Teaching in Small Classes, 27 November 2002

Selina Chow:

Madam President, I believe this Council has actually come to a significant degree of consensus today, that is, the future number of students per class in primary schools should be less than the present number.

In fact, I believe nobody will oppose that proposition, but controversies have arisen in the course of discussion. For example, to what extent should the number of students per class be reduced? How should it be dealt with? How should it be implemented in order to benefit all the school children? At first, I have prepared a long essay as my speech, however, it seems that most Honourable colleagues have mentioned all of the arguments and some have studied the issue even more thoroughly than I have. For example, some have cited the cases of foreign countries and the development in Shanghai; some have come to the conclusion that the result has been encouraging while others considered the result disappointing, and it is needless to mention the controversies arising in the course of debate.

Nevertheless, I would like to express my opinions on several points already discussed, including the question raised by Ms Audrey EU: Should we do some give and take and should all of our resources be allocated to whole-day schooling? Is whole-day schooling better? She said it was not necessary better because she could not see any advantage from the whole-day schooling her daughter was attending. I believe a lot of dissimilar views and studies would emerge in the course of the education reform. Some people may insist that whole-day schooling is a must, small-class teaching, on the other hand, is of secondary importance; while others consider both of them should give way to language proficiency which is of the utmost importance, and therefore resources should be allocated to the fostering of language proficiency.

Certainly, in view of our status as legislators, and the free expression of opinions, everybody may dream his own dream, but the Government could not afford this luxury. Since we are not subject to resource constraints in conception, we may think about the plan at liberty, as we have unlimited resources in our minds. Therefore, we may feel free to voice our opinions as to what is considered the best time to implement whatever policy. But in reality, there are lots of constraints confronting the Government. To a certain extent, it has to cut the coat according to the cloth available and it has to do so irrespective of the abundance, not to mention that we have not much cloth in hand now in comparison with

the past. So the Government has to do some give and take in consideration of the constraint of resources. Certainly, before making the choice, the Government has to listen to public opinions made by people from different walks of life from various perspectives. I believe this is something which every Honourable Member would wish the Government to do. However, things can never be that desirable as 10 different people will have 10 different views. Not all of these views can be accepted, because the resources of the Government are really limited.

With regard to the issue of 25 students per class, without any apparent reason, Mr SZETO Wah suddenly challenged Mr Tommy CHEUNG for the small class theory of 40 students per class brought up by Mr CHEUNG, but in fact Mr CHEUNG had never said that before. Mr Tommy CHEUNG had made it very clear in his amendment that 25 students per class should not become a restriction. At that point, another Member criticized him: Why should there be no restriction? The reason is actually very simple, which could be found in the speech of Ms Audrey EU. It is because nobody knows which number is better, for instance, limiting the class size to 18, 20 or 25 students, for we only know that the number should be gradually reduced.

All of us hold the same opinion in general, that is, it would be better if the class size is reduced, as teachers may have more time to communicate and to hold dialogue with each student, or to teach them something other than classroom knowledge. Looking back at the recommendation made by the Education Commission (EC) then, no rigid timetable was set. Madam President, perhaps you should know better. Please do not say that the only thing I do is keeping the timetable in mind. I also remember that no rigid figure was set at that time, as the only recommendation was the adoption of an orderly and gradual approach. There was no clear conclusion in many areas as to a fixed number or a rigid timetable was considered desirable. Moreover, neither do I believe the case in every place is the same. For this reason, I consider it necessary to conduct a study which I believe is important.

The Liberal Party considers that we should not jump to the conclusion that the proposal must be implemented and each class should have 25 students before the study is completed. We should not conduct a study with a prerequisite like that, because a study is a study, and a lot of information would be found in the course of study to help us decide the manner of implementation and understand how the resources should be deployed in order to achieve the best result.

Of course, the training of teachers is also indispensable. If the class size is abruptly reduced by a great margin, teachers should adopt different teaching methods as the requirements of society on teachers should also be different. Our teachers may not necessarily adapt to the change quickly, because they have to go through a training process. Thus, I consider the amendment of Mr Tommy CHEUNG more practical because he has explained his agreement in principle. However, we

should look into ways of implementing the proposal and how resources can be deployed in detail.

Today, I feel sorry and disappointed after listening to the remarks of Mr SZETO Wah. I consider it unnecessary to label other people having "loyalists motive" when other people are just holding opposing opinions. I think it is not necessary for him to humiliate or discredit others. I feel that his approach will only become a negative example of a democratic debate. With regard to the remark made by several Honourable Members that the Secretary for Education and Manpower, Prof Arthur LI, has eaten his own words, I have no intention to bootlick the Secretary, but I think that the rationale is quite simple. Before the Secretary shouldered the present burden as the Bureau Director, he could speak of his dreams and ignore the reality just as we do. But now he is facing all sort of dreams that legislators, parents and the public are making and demanding of him, he could not ignore the allocation of resources and turn a blind eye to the need to strike a right balance when he acts.

Thank you, Madam President.