

# Accountability growing: Ford

THE civil service was committed to the maintenance of stability and prosperity in Hongkong as well as helping to govern it effectively and efficiently, the Chief Secretary, Mr David Ford, said.

Although the style of the Government as well as personalities and relationships in the Legislative Council might change, Mr Ford was confident the mutual concern of councillors and the public service to do what was best for the public would remain the same.

Mr Ford said greater Government accountability had become inevitable as Hongkong people were now more knowledgeable, more demanding and more prepared to speak their minds.

"Public debate on Government business has also become more lively, sometimes even heated, and the fullest justification for any Government measure is now expected as a matter of course," he said.

"These developments are

healthy and good for the community and we in the public service welcome them."

But Mr Ford said when the clamour of debate was over, decisions had to be taken and sometimes they were not popular with all sectors of the community.

There might be differences in opinions on various issues but the motivation of the Government in reaching decisions would be the best interest of the community as a whole.

He noted public expectations of better service, better results and more emphasis on cost-effectiveness in public spending were rising.

On civil service efficiency, he assured the council that the momentum of the value-for-money exercise would be maintained.

On top of the establishment of the value-for-money steering groups in seven departments, Mr Ford said similar groups would be formed in four other depart-

ments, while there were plans to spread the scheme to all departments.

On civil service growth, he said the Government had continued to contain the size of the service.

After five years of zero growth, the provision of 3,454 new posts in this fiscal year represented an increase of just 1.9 per cent over the establishment approved for the last financial year, and the increase was reasonable and necessary, he said.

Mr Ford said pressure had been building up to improve the quality of services and facilities in the older established areas, particularly in the fields of health and social welfare.

He admitted that sometimes the quality of services, particularly in some areas of social work, had not always kept pace with public expectations, which had risen sharply as Hongkong became more affluent and aware of international standards.

"There has not been any

lack of will or vision by the departments concerned to provide better services but their expansion has been restricted by our continuing policy of working to contain the growth of the service as a whole," he said.

Mr Ford said personal freedom and enterprise were central to the philosophy of a non-interventionist economic policy which had served Hongkong well.

On civil service salary levels, Mr Ford agreed that a major consideration was the principle of fair comparison of pay with that for similar employment in the private sector. But salaries should be adequate to attract the talent to provide an efficient service with high morale.

He said promotion criteria in the civil service would be based on merit - ability, experience and performance - rather than counting mistakes that had been made.

He noted training was an integral part of the process of increasing productivity.