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A 'crash diet' may not be the answer for civil service

A GOOD civil service is at least as important to Hongkong as a new airport by 1997. The plan of the Finance Branch to freeze some 9,000 jobs in the Government is not going to be popular.

Coming at a sensitive time, it is likely to affect morale within the civil service as well as raise the public's concern, if seen as a move to cut back in order to scrape together enough cash to pay for the new grand plan.

However, it is indeed high time to re-examine the establishment, workload and management of the civil service. With or without the new airport, the growth of the civil service is by itself a worrying phenomenon.

The Financial Secretary, Sir Piers Jacobs, clearly warned in his budget speech last April that the growth of the civil service was getting over the guideline of 2.5 per cent and getting out of hand.

The growth for 1988-89 was four per cent, and growth projected for 1989-90 was 3.9 per cent. He cautioned severely against this trend, but apparently could offer no concrete plans to curb it.

This was perhaps understandable. In a year of big surpluses such warnings as overheating the economy are unlikely to impress.

Government departments were complaining about rapidly increasing workloads and the difficulty of getting staff replacements due to the twin problem of the brain drain and the labour shortage.

They were asking not only for an increase in establishment but also for a higher ratio of senior posts in order to induce people to stay.

Doctors and nurses were not the only people complaining. They were merely those who had the clearest public support, at least to begin with. The Edu-



VIEWPOINT

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tions, RTHK and the Hospital Authority are the next in line.

Why was such a terrific growth rate necessary in recent years? Was it necessary? Have services expanded as much? Or has there been too relaxed a management attitude in spite of the much publicised "value for money" campaign of the Finance Branch? Was money spent simply because there was money to spend?

Part of the tremendous workload is no doubt due to "democratisation". That is, with the Government moving towards a more representative

ingly time-consuming, greatly

beyond what the general public might suspect from the net achievement of Legco's question time.

Part of the work load is created by circumstances outside Hongkong's control: such as the problem of Vietnamese boat people. Yet the problem remains that the civil service is expanding too fast. The immediate problem is of course the burden on the public purse, but it is not just that.

It is a commitment in terms of housing and other benefits, and the much discussed pension which has recently aroused such concern among civil servants.

These commitments go beyond 1997. While at present there does not seem to be any problem in meeting the commitments, surely it is wise to avoid burdening the new SAR Government with an excessively large civil service.

Without doubting for a min-

ute the often repeated claim that Hongkong is well served by its civil service, one cannot help feeling that there is some room for trimming down, for more vigorous management with a keener awareness of using resources to the greatest advantage.

Having said all that, it does not follow that the indiscriminate freeze of all posts at present standing vacant is necessarily the right approach. After all, the difficulty of recruitment may not be a symptom of absence of need or sheer impossibility of getting anyone qualified to be interested.

It may be because of certain problems in the present policy of that particular department, and the situation may improve with a change of policy.

For example, it will be wrong to wipe out the vacant posts for social workers in these times when Hongkong is seeking to improve its social ser-

VICES, simply because given the present arrangements it is hard to get social workers to stay with the Government.

If a reducing diet is what the doctor prescribes for the better health of the civil service, then one should go for it with determination as well as in a positive spirit.

But as everyone who has been through dieting well knows, it has to be done wisely and steadily, without too great a shock to the system or creating a deep sense of deprivation.

Civil servants should be won over to the view that a leaner civil service is best for all, so that they will be committed to the program.

Otherwise, discontent and drop in morale will result, wastage will increase, recruitment might become even more difficult, and the Government may then, in panic, again revert to throwing money at the problem.