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A dangerous precedent

CHIEF Secretary Anson Chan Fang On-sang has an excellent grasp of the details of the various policies and programs she has been called upon to implement.

But she has seldom offered us a glimpse of her private thoughts about those policies and programs. Like all good civil servants, she has been aware of the need to maintain a discreet silence.

All the more surprising, therefore, to discover that Mrs Chan chose to share some of her private thoughts about public matters in an interview with *Newsweek* magazine.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Mrs Chan attempted to discredit Chief Executive-designate Tung Chee-hwa in the article.

She spoke frankly about Mr Tung's policies, particularly when asked about his emphasis on Asian values.

Some Western observers have charged that certain Asian leaders use "Asian values" as a shield to deflect attacks on human rights abuses. Mrs Chan certainly did not go that far. She did, however, speak of the universality of such values and suggested that these values alone would not be enough to run Hong Kong.

Mrs Chan expressed particular concern about the need to maintain "the culture and the way we do things here within the civil service". And while she praised Mr Tung's personal qualities, she noted that he "doesn't have a real deep understanding of the way the government works".

Although she went out of her way to stress that the civil service must be politically neutral, we believe a dangerous precedent has been set. Open challenges of this nature must not be allowed to happen.

We have to remember that the civil service is unusual. Since we have not traditionally had politicians, civil servants have been involved in formulating policies.

They are also notoriously jealous of their "turf". Some may worry that Mr Tung may in future tend to rely more on outside people for advice. If such misconceptions do exist, Mr Tung must clear them up before they have a disastrous effect on morale.