

A critical look at social security

The Legislative Council debate on Wednesday on the Green Paper on Social Security Development deserves to be seen as more than a fine tooth combing exercise by the Unofficials, who clearly spent long hours and gave deep thought to this major advance in social thinking by the Government.

While there is general satisfaction with the pace at which the Government is moving there is an evident desire to see it push ahead more resolutely on various issues than the Green Paper proposes.

And if fiscal restraint has been a significant influence in the framing of proposals in the past there is a growing feeling that Hongkong has reached a stage where it could afford more and better services to the deserving members of our community.

Mr Hilton Cheong-Leen was right to remind the Council that in any scheme of social security the special factors of Hongkong's existence must be kept in mind and particularly that the system has to be related to our economic activities and growth.

Yet this did not vitiate the point made by the Unofficials that there was scope for improvement in the Green Paper proposals.

Miss Joyce Bennett, for example, wanted to see the age of eligibility for the old age allowance reduced to 70 as soon as possible - "there is no valid argument to postpone this any longer," she added.

She also tackled the way in which junior officials exercised discretionary powers and was critical of the fact that "too frequently the indigent poor give up their applications (for benefits) because of the cold demeanour and black face of junior officials who . . . exercise their authority by using delaying tactics and deferring a decision."

Miss Ko Siu-wah, who supported this plea, also made the important point that the approach to social security should shift gradually in its emphasis from "the Government helping those unable to help themselves to Government helping people to help themselves."

She also pressed for improvement of the existing public assistance scheme particularly for widows with dependent children, and for the present weighting system of the public assistance index (by which the amount of allowance is fixed) to be brought more into line with the Consumer Price Index.

Dr Harry Fang, among other Unofficials, pressed the point of making the profoundly deaf eligible for the disability allowance and Fr P. T. McGovern, who introduced the motion, proposed a variety of amendments aimed at strengthening the Government's plan.

Of greatest importance, however, was the unanimous contention of the unofficials' ad hoc group that "the Government should provide enough financial resources to meet known requirements rather than to adjust requirements to meet the allocation of resources."

In short, let us clarify the needs and find the money and not try and make the needs fit whatever funds are available.

Apart from suggested improvements to the chronic sickness and old age allowances he urged that the two-year experimental sickness, injury and survival benefit scheme should begin by the end of 1980 and be followed by a decision as to whether it should become compulsory, two years later.

Fr McGovern's view is that it will be found necessary to make it compulsory and indeed this is echoed by many outside the Government.

Overall the Unofficial views provide valuable support for upgrading and improving our social security plans which as Miss Ko Siu-wah said "help create a stable society . . . which in turn make Hongkong a better place to live in."