

Bigger say in policy demanded

The Government came under heavy fire from pressure groups and students yesterday for not heeding public opinion, when a three-day seminar opened on Hongkong's Political System.

Speakers spoke heatedly on the representativeness of the Government.

And some students from the floor also joined the discussion, demanding more public representation in law-making and policy formulation.

The seminar forms a large part of the Hongkong Week organised by the Hongkong Federation of Students and other student groups.

The director of the People's Council on Public Housing Policy, Mr Fung Kin-kee, said that Hongkong people basically had no rights of participation in the policy-making process of the Government.

"They could only participate in a very informal and indirect way: that is, petition to the Government or present their views to the mass media and through it, the Government," said Mr Fung, who is also an Urban Councillor.

Referring to public housing,

Mr Fung said that the Housing Authority should be reorganised with a majority of its members being elected.

Furthermore, there should be open access to documents and information on all meetings and public housing green papers should be issued.

On the district level, he said, special housing committees should be formed under district boards.

He also called for joint housing management committees to be held between housing officials and residents in each public housing estate.

**Hongkong
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Another Urban Councillor, Dr Denny Huang, said that consultation meant canvassing views and did not guarantee the acceptance of any particular view, particularly when this represented only a small group of individuals however vocal they might be.

Dr Huang, who is also the chairman of the Operations Committee of the Housing Authority, said that while the Authority placed great stress on public opinion, sometimes it found that small groups of individuals or organisations claimed to represent the views of the majority "through their aggressive and vocal approach."

"However, in reality, they are often merely small groups of tenants or residents' associations with limited membership," he said.

The groups often made a lot of noise, but could really only represent themselves and could in no way speak for the majority of the people.

He also stressed that in deciding its policies, the Housing Authority was not deflected by corruption or personal interests.

"Policies are constantly reviewed and reformed, and in so doing, the Housing Authority is backed by its decades of experience."

Dr Huang said that people often mixed up the provision of public housing with social welfare.

"Public housing is provided to those most in need and is not something which is free for all to claim without regard to realities," he said.

He added that it had been suggested that many more public housing tenants should become members of the Housing Authority.

"It sounds like a reasonable proposal."

However, public housing was a public subsidised programme, he said.

Dr Huang said that public money spent on this programme could better be supervised by a third party with no personal interest in it.

Mr Fung disagreed. He said that tenants knew exactly what their housing problems were and should be given a say.

"And they should be represented in the Housing Authority," he said.

Another speaker, the Assistant Director (Estate) of the Housing Department, Mr Chan Pak, said the present set-up with the Housing Authority provided for a constructive input from unofficial members who were in day-to-day touch with the community.

Through their grassroots contact, they had been able to formulate effective decisions and give sound advice in the interests of the public.

There are 28 unofficial members — or a two-thirds majority — in the present Housing Authority.

Meanwhile, two education spokesmen lashed out at the "high-handed" manner of the Government officials in formulating education policies.

The chairman of the Hongkong Professional Teachers' Association, Mr Szeto Wah, said that the Government seldom considered the opinions of the association which represented about 70 per cent of all the teachers in Hongkong.

He doubted very much that the Government was sincere on obtaining public opinion.

Mr Szeto, whose association has a membership of 27,000, suggested that teachers, parents and students be allowed to participate in the formulation of education policy and that elected members be allowed on the Board of Education.

He also called for Government meetings on important education issues to be opened to the public.

A senior lecturer of the School of Education at the Chinese University, Dr Cheng Shiu-ching, said that there was seldom public participation in the formulation of education policies.

"The formulation is always one-sided."

He said that the representation of local educationalists on the Board of Education and the University and Polytechnic Grants Committee was very small; only four of the 22 BE members and none of the 15 UPGC members.

He said that there was a great shortage of educational professionals such as curriculum specialists, education technologists, educational planners and education philosophers.