

Bigger political scope sought

by
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PRESSURE group leaders, lecturers and students yesterday strongly criticised the government for not providing greater scope for public participation in Hongkong's political system.

The vigorous attack was launched at a seminar attended by two government representatives, defending the administration's policies.

It was the first of a three-day seminar focussing on the people's participation in policy-making, and is also the main event of the "Hongkong Week" organised by student bodies of the universities, polytechnic, and colleges.

Officiating at the opening ceremony, Secretary for District Administration, Mr David Akers-Jones, described the seminar as "an important time in history."

In a brief speech to the 200 attendants, mostly students, Mr Akers-Jones praised young people here for their sense of social responsibility, which he said was not hampered and reduced by the education system and other factors as claimed.

A total of 27 speakers will talk on a wide range of subjects in the seminar. They will include government officials, Legislative and Urban Councillors, lecturers, pressure group leaders, a magazine director, a member of the People's Political Consultative Conference and observers.

It kicked off yesterday with 10 speakers giving their views on public participation in matters concerning housing, education, public utilities and social welfare.

The five speakers who spoke in the morning session were clearly divided in their views on housing and education.

Chairman of the Housing Authority's Operations Committee, Dr Denny Huang, noted that our government system is not one in which departments are answerable to ministers who in turn obtain their mandate through election by the people.

"It is also within this framework that public housing policies are formulated and implemented... Members of the Housing Authority are appointed by the government," he said.

Dr Huang stressed the authority gives serious consideration to public views and opinions before making any important decisions.

"Sometimes we find small groups of individuals or organisations, through their aggressive and vocal approach, claiming to represent the views of majority public."

"However in reality they are often merely small groups of tenants or residents' associations with limited membership. Although they make a lot of noise, they can really only represent themselves and can, in no way, speak for the majority of the public," he said.

He went on to say that "consultation means the canvassing of views; it does not guarantee that any

particular view will be accepted or will predominate — particularly when it represents only a small group of individuals however vocal they may be."

Dr Huang noted that some people often mix up the provision of public housing with social welfare.

"There is undoubtedly a significant element of public subsidy involved in public housing... But this subsidy is not available to everyone as of right. Hongkong is not rich enough to provide comprehensive care from cradle to grave," he said, adding that public housing was provided to those most in need.

He said there were suggestions that many more public housing tenants should become members of the Housing Authority.

"It sounds like a reasonable proposal. However, we must not forget that public housing is a publicly subsidised programme. Public money spent on this programme should better be supervised by a third party who has no personal interest in it," he said.

Dr Huang was joined by the assistant director of housing (estates), Mr Chan Pak, who explained in detail the set up of the Housing Authority and its balanced policies and smooth implementation.

"Though direct public participation in public housing policy formulation is limited, the channels for public opinion to be reflected to the Authority are many and diverse," he said.

He said there are 28 Unofficial Members in the Authority, representing a two-thirds majority, and that all six committees were chaired by Unofficials.

"Of the Unofficials, three also serve as Legislative Councillors, 11 as Urban Councillors, and four as Heungyeekuk members, while in total 16 are also serving on various

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District Boards," he said.

"Together, they have a very broad base of experience and representation and can thus apply critical and conscientious perspective in determining policies."

"The present set up is in line with the existing total government system, and as this system continues to evolve, I am sure the Housing Authority will also move forward," he said.

The three other speakers strongly criticised the lack of public participation in the political system.

The director of People's Council on Public Housing Policy and Urban Councillor, Mr Fung Kin-kee, said public opinion might be considered, but the people are not represented in policy-making.

He said public housing residents were the most suitable people to take part in formulating housing policy because they understand the problems best.

Mr Fung suggested reorganising the Housing Authority to include members from the public.

A senior lecturer of Chinese University's School of Education, Mr Cheng Shiu-ching, wondered whether the Green Papers on education policies in recent years, had been screened by the government, because there was not a body to supervise them.

In the Board of Educa-

tion, he said, only half of the 22 members in 1981 were in the education field. And half of the members were not local people.

"It is disappointing to know that only four members are both local people and in the educational field," Mr Cheng said.

In the Universities and Polytechnic Grants Committee (UPGC), he continued, only half of its 15 members belonged to the educational field, and only about 25 per cent are local people.

"If we are to find members who are local people in the education field, the answer is an astonishing zero!" he said.

Mr Cheung advocated more access to information on education, overall review on education, training of professionals such as curriculum specialists, educational technologists, planners and philosophers.

The president of Professional Teachers' Union, Mr Szeto Wah, also criticised the government for failing to allow public participation in drafting educational policies.