

\$5m fee for consultant questioned

By DOROTHY LAI

LEGISLATORS plan to question the Government about its \$5 million consultancy package for the new public affairs adviser, Mr John Elliott.

The creation of new government posts is normally approved by the Legco Finance Committee, but the appointment of Mr Elliott, former Hongkong-based correspondent for the *Financial Times*, was not.

His selection was announced in July and since September he has been involved in drawing up a public relations strategy for the Government's controversial port and airport development.

Legislator Mr Cheung Man-kwong said he planned to question the Government about how Mr Elliott's post was funded, the need for the post, and under what circumstances the administration could by-pass the Finance Committee when hiring consultants.

"The sum of \$5 million is not a small amount. How can the administration take it so lightly in spending taxpayers' money?"

"The appointment

shows there is an uneven allocation of resources. Thousands of social workers protested against the \$16 million reduction in social welfare spending, while someone can easily get \$5 million for a single post," he said.

Legco member Mr Chim Pui-chung said the Government should not have by-passed the Finance Committee in appointing Mr Elliott.

"Legislators should have the right to know how taxpayers' money is being used," he said.

Mr Tam Yiu-chung said he was surprised to learn legislators could be left out of a decision to pay out \$5 million to hire Mr Elliott and he would be requesting an explanation.

Mr Albert Chan Wai-yip said he also wanted an explanation and would be contacting Chief Secretary Sir David Ford, to whom Mr Elliott reports.

Granted a three-year contract, the total bill for Mr Elliott's services is understood to be just under \$5 million.

It is understood the pay package is comparable to that of a D2 officer on the

director pay scale who earns, excluding perks, up to \$69,050 a month.

Instead of opting to have fringe benefits, such as housing and education allowances, Mr Elliott chose to have the perks in cash, taking his monthly total to about \$120,000.

The housing allowance for a D2 officer can reach \$27,000 a month.

It has been estimated that if all allowances were cashed, they could amount to about 70 per cent of the salary.

The Government has decided to keep secret the terms of Mr Elliott's contract, rank and salary.

When announcing his appointment, a government spokesman said that as a matter of policy the Government did not disclose the fee it paid to consultants.

Mr Elliott earns less than the Director of Information Services, Mrs Irene Yau Lee Che-yun, a D5 officer with a monthly salary of \$91,100, and the Information Co-ordinator, Mr Mike Hanson, on the D4 rank, the pay scale of which ranges from \$85,850 up to \$88,450 a month.