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\$200,000 election ceiling favoured

By FANNY WONG
and DAPHNE CHENG

THE Government has tentatively set a ceiling of \$200,000 on election campaign expenses for next year's maiden direct polls to the Legislative Council.

A final proposal is expected to be submitted to the Executive Council before September.

The Chief Secretary, Sir David Ford, earlier told Executive and Legislative Councillors that the Government intended to set the limit between \$150,000 and \$300,000.

Senior Legislative Councillor, Mr Allen Lee Peng-fei, said people were divided on how much would be adequate for electioneering.

It would also depend on the size of the electorate, he said.

Mr Lee declined to say how much he felt would be a fair figure, adding that it would be a job for the administration.

The convener of the Omelco Constitutional Development Panel, Mr An-

drew Wong Wang-fat, said \$200,000 should be adequate.

He said the panel would discuss the issue with the Secretary for Constitutional Affairs, Mr Michael Suen Ming-yeung, on Monday.

Mr Wong said: "The limit should be set as low as possible. If it is too high, it will result in a waste of resources."

The Government, he said, should instead provide more free mailing of election materials to voters to help relieve candidates' financial burden.

His colleagues, Mr Michael Cheng Tak-kin and Mr Kingsley Sit Ho-yin, both said candidates for the Legislative Council direct elections should be allowed to spend more.

Mr Cheng said: "Considering the large number of voters, anything between \$150,000 and \$300,000 would be unable to cover the expenses." He suggested the ceiling be set at between \$500,000 and \$700,000.

Mr Sit said the limit should be set at \$500,000.

"People have got to understand that running elections needs money. To set the limit at \$500,000 does not mean that every candidate has to spend that much.

"\$200,000 appears to be a great amount. But in elections, postage alone can take up that sum," he said.

Mr Sit expressed fears that a lower limit would dampen voter enthusiasm.

"Candidates can still work with a tighter budget but their electioneering activities may have to be trimmed to fit that amount," he said.

The vice-chairman of the United Democrats of Hongkong, Mr Yeung Sum, favoured a limit between \$150,000 and \$250,000.

He said it should be able to cover the basic campaign expenses. "The Government should consider the ability of the average candidates who cannot afford great expense.

"If the limit is too high, it will end up that only the rich can stand for elections. It will then lose the meaning of having elections, he said."

Also favouring lower spending was Regional Councillor, Mr Stephen Ng Ming-yum, who said the limit should be between \$150,000 and \$200,000.

"I oppose setting the limit too high. It will turn away people with no backing from financially strong groups," he said.

Meanwhile, the Registration Officer, Mr Lai Kwantat, said the number of registered voters stood at 1,597,567 in January.

Among the nine constituencies for the 1991 polls, Kowloon Central had the highest number of registered voters with 244,577. New Territories North had the lowest with only 91,090 registered voters.

Mr Lai said the Government planned to stage a large-scale publicity campaign for voter registration from August 15 to October 1.

Unless the Government decided to accommodate late registration, people who failed to register by October 1 will not be able to vote in the 1991 elections.