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\$18m campaign to boost voter count

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

Stanley Leung, Christine McGee and Bill Ko

THE Government plans to spend a record \$18 million next year on a publicity campaign to encourage people to vote in elections.

The plan was unveiled to the Legislative Council yesterday by Chief Secretary Sir David Ford.

He said the Government had registered 241,000 new voters during the current campaign.

This had been described as "disappointing" by some legislators.

Sir David said the Government had not set a target for the current voter-registration exercise.

But it is understood the Government intended to register about 500,000 new voters on top of the existing 1.6 million.

In a major campaign that began in August, the Government spent \$5.5 million to encourage people to register.

By October 1, Sir David said, 430,000 application

forms were received, but many were only notifications of address changes, or duplicates of registrations.

Sir David said the Government expected the provisional register of electors, published tomorrow, will have 241,000 new voters in addition to the existing 1.6 million.

Compared with the last exercise, he said the Government was "reasonably well satisfied with the current result".

Between 1985 and 1989, he said the net increase of new voters was 156,000 people.

He expected about 50,000 more would come during the next few weeks, putting the final register of electors, due to be published in January, at 1.85 million.

Some legislators ques-

tioned whether the Government could do more to encourage people to register and vote.

Sir David, however, rejected suggestions of compulsory registration and voting, saying it was rarely used around the world.

Since the response to the registration drive was not good enough, James Tien asked if the Government would consider introducing compulsory voting for next year's elections.

Sir David said it was highly questionable whether democracy should be practised through compulsion.

"With a few exceptions, most democracies in the world do not compel people to turn out to vote by law," he said.

"In a free society such as ours, we firmly believe

that it should be left to the free, conscious choice of the individual to exercise this right.

"This Government will not therefore introduce compulsory voting for the 1991 elections."

Sir David said no further survey would be conducted on the issue.

He also dismissed possibilities of "automatic registration of voters" based on Immigration Department figures.

Sir David said it was difficult to implement, as existing records retained by the department were not up-to-date and did not indicate people's eligibility to vote.

To encourage people to vote in the forthcoming three elections, he said the Government planned a major publicity campaign which was expected to cost \$18 million.

About \$10 million would be spent on next year's direct elections, to the Legislative Council.