

Accept duty to inform the public

Governor Chris Patten promised more open and accountable government. These pledges are looking decidedly threadbare. There has been a growing number of instances where government officials have made it abundantly clear that the public's right to know is a nice idea which has nothing to do with them.

Take the example of Barrie Wiggham, Hong Kong's most senior official in the United States. The Government has been closely questioned in the Legislative Council about the creation of Wiggham's post and the costs entailed in establishing this more senior form of representation in the US. The questioning is not unreasonable as it concerns a new venture by the government and legislators have

the right to find out whether the venture is producing results.

Because Wiggham is in Washington, he was unable to explain himself in Legco. *Eastern Express* therefore decided to question him in Washington. Here was a good opportunity to put the record straight. Lamentably, it turned into an exercise in evasion. The most simple questions about who he was meeting and what he was achieving were shoved on to a meandering path leading nowhere.

There is no excuse for this. Wiggham is a highly experienced public official, accustomed to being in the public eye, and, as it happens, highly eloquent in explaining government policy. However, he seems to believe that the manner in which public money

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is spent on his office, and the results achieved, are nobody's business but his own and that of his superiors.

A similar contemptuous attitude was recently on display in Legco when the hours worked by judges was a subject of questioning. The judiciary had to be reminded

by the Chief Secretary that this was a legitimate request for information.

The Chief Secretary, however, was much less than forthcoming when questioned about the enormous increase in her expenses. For all we know they may be perfectly justified but Anson Chan will

not deign to tell the public how she spends this money. The words *public money* clearly have little meaning in her book.

If the most senior officials show such reluctance to provide information, little wonder that the cancer of secrecy pervades the civil service.

It is evident at every level. Petty bureaucrats in government offices brusquely tell members of the public what to do. Magistrates dispense justice in minor matters without the slightest attempt at explanation. Policemen shout at and push around law-abiding citizens in the name of crime prevention.

All the bravado which surrounded Patten's performance pledges looks pretty weak down at ground level

where so-called public servants have yet to appreciate that the provision of information and explanation is not an optional and unnecessary part of their duties but an integral component of the job.

It is hard to change the corporate culture of the civil service.

Old habits die very hard indeed. However, changes must be made if the Government is to achieve credibility and trust.

Hong Kong has traditionally been governed in the manner of a benevolent dictatorship by a small clique of public officials who believed that they possessed superior knowledge about the mysteries of ruling and had no responsibility to demystify the process of government. This

led to a high degree of arrogance and a feeling that any external incursion into the workings of the bureaucracy was to be resisted as a point of principle.

By and large this state of affairs was accepted by the population which found themselves living in a stable society, enjoying economic growth and protected by the reasonably consistent application of the rule of the law.

However, Hong Kong society is becoming considerably more sophisticated and politicised. What used to be acceptable is no longer good enough.

The days of the Big Daddy civil service knows best are over.

How long will it take for civil servants to recognise this and change their ways?

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