

CHAPTER 3

LIAISON WITH CIVIL SERVICE ASSOCIATIONS AND PRIVATE SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

3.1 Since 1992, the Commission has held informal meetings with the four major civil service associations viz. Association of Expatriate Civil Servants of Hong Kong (AECS), Senior Non-Expatriate Officers Association (SNEOA), Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association (HKCCSA) and Model Scale 1 Staff Consultative Council (MOD 1 Council). At the Commission's meeting in February 1996, the Commission decided that, to canvass a wider spectrum of views, the Commission should also meet three other general staff unions viz. Hong Kong Civil Servants General Union, Government Employees Association and Federation of Civil Service Unions.

3.2 Meetings with the seven staff associations were subsequently held in March/April 1996 and in September/October 1996. As in previous years, the meetings provided a useful opportunity for us to hear, at first hand, matters of concern to civil servants. We were impressed by the responsible attitude of the staff representatives. It was reassuring to know that all of them attached great importance to maintaining the stability of the civil service during this important period of transition. The majority view was that the morale of civil servants had not been significantly affected by constitutional developments. However, the staff representatives pointed out that while civil servants had some worries, they preferred to adopt a 'wait-and-see' attitude while remaining cautiously optimistic about the future. The staff representatives were unanimous that before the change of sovereignty, the Administration should avoid making major changes to civil service pay and conditions of service. Our response was that unless there were overriding reasons to do so, we did not consider it necessary to introduce any major changes to civil service pay and conditions of service prior to 1997. However, where existing provisions were clearly inappropriate because of the impending change of sovereignty, such provisions should be changed by the Administration well in advance of 1997. One example is the Commission's recommendation in 1994 to the Administration to consider the provision of new arrangements for the Overseas Education Allowance scheme which presently requires children of existing local officers to be educated in the United Kingdom before the officers can draw the allowance.

3.3 In addition to these general views, a wide range of other issues were raised by the staff representatives. These were mainly concerned with matters of benefits and improvement proposals affecting individual grades. Foremost in the list of benefits affecting civil servants across all ranks was housing. The reduction in the number of public rental housing units reserved for junior civil servants was thus a cause for complaint. Senior civil servants, on the other hand, would wish to see an increase in the rate for the Private Tenancy Allowance and asked for participation in the Civil Service Branch working group formed to tackle the issue of surplus non-Departmental quarters. The next item of concern was the provision of medical and dental facilities. The Administration was urged to take steps to increase the number of private beds reserved for civil servants in hospitals managed by the Hospital Authority and consider reimbursement of expenses for staff seeking treatment from private doctors.

3.4 As regards proposals affecting the structure and pay scales of individual grades, staff representatives in the Personal Secretary grade, the Clerical Officer grade, the Police Interpreter grade, the Consumer Services Inspector grade were keenly concerned that with the evolution of heavier duties and responsibilities over the years, the Administration should give sympathetic and early consideration to their improvement proposals. They took the opportunity to point out to us significant changes that had happened to their work and factors which in their view justified their proposals.

3.5 We exchanged extensive views with staff representatives on those issues which were known to us. Where the issues were new or still under consideration by the Administration, we listened to their presentation and referred their requests to the Administration for follow-up action. We will continue to take an active interest in these issues.

3.6 One particular issue raised at these meetings deserved special mention. At our meeting with the AECS on 22nd April 1996, the AECS submitted a request that the Commission should recommend to the Government a review of the 1968 Agreement (on staff consultation in the civil service). Specifically, the AECS sought -

- (a) the deletion of the escape clause whereby the Government may, on grounds of public interest, make or refuse to make any changes in conditions of service;
- (b) the removal of the Governor's power of veto; and

- (c) the establishment of a committee of inquiry in case of unresolved disputes.

3.7 This was the first time a formal submission was made by any staff association at our informal meetings. Having regard to clause IV of the Commission's terms of reference which stipulates that the Commission "shall give due weight to the need for good staff relations within the civil service, and in tendering its advice shall be free to make any recommendations which would contribute to this end", we agreed that the AECS's submission should be accepted.

3.8 The AECS's submission and the Administration's response were considered by us at the Commission's meeting on 18th June 1996. We were of the view that during this important period of transition, major amendments to the 1968 Agreement as proposed by the AECS would not be in the public interest. We considered that any government had a responsibility not only towards civil servants but also towards the community at large.

3.9 We noted, however, that for the period from 1982 to April 1996, neither the Administration nor the Staff Side of the Senior Civil Service Council initiated a review of the 1968 Agreement as provided under clause 15 of that Agreement. This observation led to our recommendation that the Administration should, after the change of sovereignty in July 1997 and in consultation with the Senior Civil Service Council (which included the AECS), conduct regular reviews of the 1968 Agreement. Our views and recommendations were conveyed to the Secretary for the Civil Service on 25th June 1996 and to the AECS on the same date.

3.10 On 19th July 1996, the Commission was informed by the Secretary for the Civil Service that the Administration had informed the Staff Side of the Senior Civil Service Council at its meeting on 11th July 1996 that the Administration -

- (a) accepted the Commission's view that major amendments to the 1968 Agreement during this important period of transition would not be in the public interest;
- (b) accepted in principle the Commission's recommendation that the 1968 Agreement should be reviewed at regular intervals after July 1997; and

- (c) would consider introducing an appropriate mechanism to implement the recommendation in (b) above.

3.11 We are grateful to the seven staff associations for the frank exchange of views on matters of concern to civil servants. Equally, we are grateful to the Administration for their responses. We attach great importance to these meetings and will see to it that progress reports will be submitted to the Commission regularly.

3.12 In the course of the year, the Secretary General increased the Commission's liaison efforts with various private sector organisations including the Employers' Federation of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management, the Hong Kong Management Association and the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce. The aim was to keep track of developments in the private sector and, where appropriate, to make use of the opportunity to clarify misconceptions or explain matters related to civil service pay, conditions of service and pay trend surveys. In June 1996, the Secretary General also attended the 1996 World Congress on Personnel Management organised by the Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management and the World Federation of Personnel Management Associations, where she had the opportunity to exchange views with world leaders in the field of human resource management.

3.13 We have reviewed the new initiatives and consider the efforts to be effective in cultivating mutual understanding and in keeping us abreast of developments in the civil service and the private sector. We will not only continue to maintain contact with civil servants through the Commission's meetings with the seven major civil service associations but will also, through the Secretary General, embark on a new programme to brief other unions in departments under the Commission's purview. The briefings will cover all aspects of the Commission's work, including the methodology for the pay trend surveys.