

Transcript of CS' answer at
Hong Kong Public Administration Association luncheon

Following is the transcript of an answer by the Chief Secretary for Administration (CS), Mrs Carrie Lam, at a luncheon hosted by the Hong Kong Public Administration Association yesterday (September 27):

Question from the floor: The Hong Kong government is notoriously short-sighted, and has a lack of innovation with no visionary leaders. So probably you may see a gap between the leadership stratum and the whole bureaucracy. You have also mentioned that from now on, we are going to have a clear vision from top-down and bottom-up. So how can you see you can transform the current bureaucracy from being more conservative, a lack of innovation and short sighted to become a visionary team, a team that can serve the vision of CY (the Chief Executive)?

Answer by CS: Well, first of all, Carlos, you seem to have a definition of bureaucracy which is very negative. I am also a sociologist student, so I thought Max Weber said that bureaucracy could be red-tape to some people but safeguards to other people. So you need a due process, you need those rules, and the civil service is very good at those rules. But of course, sometimes, those rules have become a dictator of their own, they have forgotten the purpose and the direction of doing things, so they just stick to the procedures. This is where leaders or senior officials, whether they are principal officials or senior civil servants, should help their colleagues to overcome those rules, because without that problem being resolved I am very worried that we might not be able to have strong executive ability (執行力) and that is something which worries me a lot.

But I really do not blame individual officers or individual civil servants for that inadequate executive ability because we are living in an always changing world. You just imagine the pressure that public services are put under with all these institutions, checks and balances, all that Ombudsman, ICAC, not that they are bad, as I said, sometimes these things are good. These are the safeguards of any civic society. But if they become a major hurdle because we don't know how to deal with them, then, at the end of the day what would suffer would be the Government's executive ability to deliver things.

So how can the senior echelons help? There are several things we could do. First is of course to set a very clear direction. So we all know why we are moving in this, what we are going to achieve, targets, performance, outcomes and things like that. Practitioners are very good at those things, to set very clear directions.

Secondly, as I said, co-ordinated action. So is not just one department taking a big share of the responsibility of doing things. There will be a sort of collective responsibility and shared resources may be to overcome that.

Third is empowerment. Because we cannot have all of us at the frontline. We have a lot of colleagues at the frontline. Whether they are hawk control teams or licensing officers or police officers, they need to be empowered, they need to share the same vision, and to be told very clearly that they are given this authority that they are given this level of confidence to do their daily job. At the end of the day the buck stops with us - we will be held accountable for that particular act and particular decision. So in fact, those are the things that I will, as CS for Administration, help to do more with my colleagues because I chair heads of departments meeting every month. And I am using that occasion to really, sort of, impress upon colleagues that they really need to walk an extra mile to find new solutions, to be more creative in solving some of the social problems, apart from just asking for more resources to cope with a growing workload.

So, originally when I moved into the office, as you know CS office has the support of an EU – Efficiency Unit, which was created back in Chris Patten's days, doing this Citizen's Charter, which is good. We promised people performance targets, waiting time and things like that. Originally I wanted to turn it into an IU, which is an innovation unit. I think the time has come for the HKSAR administration to find social innovation, to find innovative solutions to some of the problems. At the moment I don't have any plans. Otherwise Kim Salkeld will be very worried to become the head of IU.