

Press Releases

Speech by SCMA at the Motion Debate on the rights and interests of the ethnic minorities at the Legislative Council

Following is the speech (English translation) by the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Mr Stephen Lam, at the Motion Debate on the rights and interests of the ethnic minorities at the Legislative Council today (July 11):

Madam President,

Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city and confluence of people from a diversity of culture and racial origins. The Government is committed to fostering social harmony and, having regard to the special needs of the ethnic minorities, provides a wide variety of support services and measures to facilitate their integration into the community.

The Basic Law, the Hong Kong Bill of Rights Ordinance and other laws of Hong Kong provide extensive constitutional and legal protections which safeguard the rights and freedom of every person in Hong Kong. Members of the ethnic minorities in Hong Kong enjoy the same protections just like others.

At the policy level, we advocate equal opportunity, promote public education and community involvement. We encourage mutual respect and acceptance of cultural differences for a harmonious and cohesive society.

Our key policy objectives could be grouped into the following three areas:

1. to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination;
2. to foster racial equality and racial harmony; and
3. to encourage integration of the racial minorities into community whilst preserving their unique cultural characteristics.

To address the needs of the ethnic minorities, we fund and provide a range of different services in education, employment and other aspects to facilitate their integration into the society. These measures have been explained in detail to Members and the public on numerous occasions which I shall not repeat here. I shall focus on the specific issues raised in the Motion and highlight relevant examples as appropriate.

Education

Government's education policy caters for the needs of different groups, including non-Chinese-speaking (NCS) students and especially those who are ethnic minorities. We have clear objectives and have taken concrete measures to ensure that NCS students can integrate into our school system and community.

Number of "designated schools" and government support measures

Currently, 10 primary schools and five secondary schools have been chosen by the Education Bureau as "designated schools". Intensive on-site support service is being provided to these schools to help them further enhance the learning and teaching of NCS students. The Education Bureau is reviewing the distribution of "designated schools" to see whether it is necessary to adjust their number in the coming (2007/08) school year.

Apart from providing school-based support, the Education Bureau has commissioned a tertiary institution to run training programmes for Chinese Language teachers in the "designated schools". In addition, an annual grant of \$300,000 is given to each "designated school" to give them flexibility in providing additional support for the education of NCS students.

An experience-sharing network has been set up among schools with NCS students to provide them with an avenue for sharing of experience and enhancing the professional capabilities of these schools in order to better cater for the needs of the ethnic minority schoolchildren.

To help NCS students who are less proficient in Chinese (in particular the late starters), the Education Bureau has commissioned a local university to run Chinese Learning Support Centres to offer remedial programmes for these students after school hours or during holidays. The Centres also help develop relevant teaching resources and provide professional advice.

To facilitate the adaptation of NCS Primary 1 entrants to local school life, the Education Bureau has been offering a 4-week Summer Bridging Programme for these students during the summer vacation. This Programme will be extended to cover NCS students proceeding to Primary 2, Primary 3 and Primary 4, to help them consolidate what they have learnt in the first Key Learning Stage.

Chinese Language curriculum and public examination for ethnic minority students

We cannot and should not assume that, just because they belong to a particular race, NCS students are only able to achieve a low level of proficiency in Chinese Language, and hence a need to develop an alternative curriculum and public examination in Chinese Language. Such an approach would not be conducive to their integration into the schools and the community.

We appreciate that the teaching of Chinese Language to NCS students poses a degree of challenge for the schools and teachers. The Education Bureau is therefore working on a supplementary guide on the teaching of Chinese to NCS students within the Chinese Language Curriculum framework. We plan to draw up a draft guide by the end of this year for consultation and to finalise it in 2008.

For NCS students who can achieve a level of Chinese language proficiency comparable to that of other local students, we encourage them to take the Chinese Language paper in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, or in future, Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination under the new secondary academic structure. For those who prefer to obtain alternative qualifications in Chinese, the Education Bureau is making arrangements to administer the UK-based General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (Chinese) examination in Hong Kong starting in 2007.

At the tertiary education level, while admission is based primarily on the merits of the students, the tertiary education institutions already exercise flexibility in determining the Chinese Language requirement for NCS students. The Education Bureau is discussing with the University Grants Committee-funded institutions the feasibility of accepting alternative qualifications in Chinese (such as the GCSE, the General Certificate in Education and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education). We plan to report progress to the relevant Panel of the Legislative Council by the end of this month.

Social services and training for ethnic minority youths

Government provides social services to the ethnic minority

youths in order to facilitate their early integration into the community. The 134 Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres (ICYSCs) throughout Hong Kong, day-time/midnight outreach services, School Social Work Service and Community Service Support Scheme etc. are all available and accessible to ethnic minority youths. ICYSCs also organise various interest and activity groups and programmes to meet local community needs, including language courses, recreational and social activities and volunteer services to enhance understanding of ethnic minority youths on their local communities and to promote their integration in the society.

The Government Race Relations Unit provides a range of services specifically targetted at minority youth groups. These include the Cross-Cultural Learning Programme for NCS Youth which helps them to integrate into the wider society through Cantonese classes and mentorship programmes. The Unit also funds Community Development Projects for non-government organisations to set up, in Yau Tsim Mong and Yuen Long Districts, community development teams for ethnic minorities. These teams provide outreaching and counseling services, establish ethnic minority volunteer groups and mutual-support teams, as well as organise training classes and mutual co-operation groups for the local ethnic minority populations.

As regard further education at secondary school level, ethnic minority youths who are beyond the normal school age are, like their local counterparts, eligible for financial assistance under the "Students of the Financial Assistance Scheme for Designated Evening Adult Education Courses" to attend recognised evening courses at higher secondary level (i.e. from Form 4 to Form 7).

As regards vocation training, there is no age limit for enrolment to most of the courses offered by the Vocational Training Council (VTC). Any person, including an ethnic minority youth, who meets the admission requirement can apply.

Vocational training and trade tests in English or ethnic minority languages

The Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (IVE) and the VTC's School of Business and Information Systems uses English as the principal medium of instruction for their post-Form 5 level courses.

To meet the needs of NCS students, the VTC will organise, in the coming academic year, 15 dedicated programmes for NCS youths and adults (including trade licensing test preparatory course for in-service personnel, full-time Foundation Diploma courses for Form 5 leavers and applied learning courses for senior secondary students etc). These programmes will offer a total of about 300 student places. The VTC also makes available relevant examination papers in English to facilitate NCS students in obtaining their trade test qualifications.

The Employees Retraining Board (ERB) is running, on a pilot basis, courses in English for NCS adults on security and property management and domestic help service. The ERB will closely monitor the progress and outcome of the pilot and consider offering more courses for the NCS adults as appropriate.

Chinese language proficiency requirement for employment with government and public bodies

The Government recruitment policy is to fill civil service vacancies through open and fair competition.

The language proficiency requirement for appointment is set to ensure a civil service which operates effectively and efficiently in both official languages of Hong Kong. Following the Civil

Service Bureau initiative, we have reviewed the entry requirements of all civil service grades to ensure that the language proficiency requirement in English and Chinese are commensurate with actual operational needs. Heads of departments/grades may determine the level of Chinese language proficiency requirement in accordance with the service needs. We believe this would enhance flexibility in recruitment and provide greater opportunities for people with various levels of language proficiency to join Government and to serve our community.

Information on job vacancies and employment services from Labour Department

The Labour Department provides a good number of free employment services to job-seekers. User-friendly vacancy search terminals are available in all the 12 Job Centres of the Department. Key information on available job vacancies are shown in both English and Chinese.

To increase accessibility of the ethnic minorities to its services, the Labour Department has published a pamphlet entitled "Easy-to-use Employment Services of the Labour Department" in different minority languages.

Regular employment talks are offered to ethnic minorities at all Job Centres to promote their understanding of the job market and to enhance their job hunting skills. In addition, the Department also operates a Job Matching Programme at all Job Centres. Under this Programme, placement officers are assigned to assist ethnic minority job-seekers to provide them with comprehensive and personalised employment services, including in-depth interview, career counseling and active job matching.

Public services

The Government's policy is to publish all publicly available written materials in both English and Chinese. Government information to be disseminated to members of the public, both verbal and written, must be made available in both English and Chinese. Letters from members of the public should be replied as far as possible in the language used in the in-coming correspondence. All frontline staff should answer enquiries or provide assistance in either English or Chinese depending on the language used by the client. For essential services such as those in hospitals or courts, translation or interpretation is provided as far as practicable to members of the public who cannot communicate in Chinese or English. In addition, we also publish ethnic minority guide books on the use of government services in various language to promote knowledge and accessibility.

The Hospital Authority (HA) arranges for free interpretation services in hospitals or clinics as far as possible for patients who cannot communicate in either Chinese or English. All public hospitals and clinics maintain a register of part-time interpreters who can be called upon to provide interpretation when needed. Patients with advanced booking for medical appointments may also approach the Patient Relations Officers for necessary arrangements.

Depending on the circumstances, social services providers may also be able to provide interpretation through volunteers or invite the assistance of the client's relatives.

The Government promotes and funds dedicated community development and support teams to encourage self-help and mutual support within the ethnic minority communities. Through the participation of ethnic minority members, these teams offer service to fellow members of the ethnic minority community by providing translation and other assistance as necessary in obtaining public/social services.

Venues for religious or cultural activities

The facilities for hire in the Leisure and Cultural Services Department's 15 civic centres and its libraries and museums, as well as the multi-purpose halls in the Home Affairs Department's 84 community halls and community centres are open to bookings from all sectors of the public and to community organisations for organising religious or cultural activities. Applications from individuals and organisations of ethnic minorities are given the same equal and fair treatment as those from other members of the community.

Applications for land grant for cultural or religious facilities from ethnic minority groups are processed in accordance with established policies and procedures, with fair and equal treatment for all and with no distinction on the ground of race or ethnicity.

Civic education and publicity campaigns

Government places significant emphasis on public education as an important cornerstone in our efforts to promote racial equality and social harmony.

Officers from the Race Relations Unit visit schools, private institutions and government departments on a regular basis and conduct talks to disseminate the messages of racial harmony and integration as well as to promote understanding of the cultures of the different ethnic groups in Hong Kong. It publishes various educational materials, including publicity posters, comic books targetted at primary and secondary school students, teachers' handbook and self-study kit for frontline civil servants.

Through the Equal Opportunities (Race) Funding Scheme, the Government encourages community organisations to organise projects on racial equality. We also fund non-Government-organisations (NGOs) to provide direct services to address the specific needs of ethnic minority groups through, for example, provision of Cantonese and English classes, Cross-cultural Learning Programme for NCS Youth and other outreaching activities.

School education occupies an important place in the long-term strategy for the promotion of racial harmony. "Respect for others" is one of the major values and attributes emphasised in the school curriculum. It is incorporated in moral education and civic education and infused in the different Key Learning Areas or subjects at various levels. Relevant education TV programmes are available for use by schools and a new programme on "Respecting Cultural Differences" which emphasise tolerance and respect for other people is also under preparation.

The Harmony Scholarship Scheme has been launched to give recognition to schools which have taken initiatives to admit a significant number of ethnic minority students. The aim is also to promote good relations among the students of different ethnic origins through participation, co-operation and exchange for mutual benefits.

Appointments to government advisory and statutory bodies

Appointments to government advisory and statutory bodies are made on the basis of individual merits, having regard to the functions of the relevant advisory and statutory bodies and their operational needs, the ability and experience of the individuals concerned as well as their likely contribution. Where appropriate, people with different backgrounds are appointed to ensure the representation of a broad spectrum of community views.

As regards the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) mentioned

by Hon CHOY So-yuk, there is already an ethnic minority member on the Commission. We will continue to consider, in the light of relevant circumstance and needs, appointing suitable persons to the Commission.

Legislation and supporting infra-structure

As mentioned, the legitimate rights and interests of different ethnic groups are well protected under various legislation and the constitutional instruments. The Hong Kong Bill of Rights is binding on the Government and all public organisations. The Race Discrimination Bill introduced into this Council last December will, if enacted, effectively extend the protection to cover NGOs and the private sector.

Under the Bill, the EOC will also have an important role to play in publicity, education, mediation and law enforcement in respect of protecting the ethnic minorities against racial discrimination.

Policy framework

"To encourage integration of the racial minorities into the community whilst preserving their unique cultural characteristics" is already one of the Government's key policy objectives on race relations.

In respect of the statistics on ethnic minorities, the Census and Statistics Department has been collecting and collating a wide range of such statistics to facilitate study, discussion, planning and decision-making by various government departments. Various government departments e.g. the Immigration Department and the Education Bureau, compile statistics on the usage of services provided to the ethnic minorities.

The Census and Statistics Department is preparing a thematic report on the minority groups based on the information collected from the 2006 By-census. The report will contain details on the population size, demographic characteristics, educational level and employment situation of the minority community and will be published for reference of the general public when available. There is no current plan to set up an additional database on ethnic minorities.

Concluding remarks

Hong Kong historically has been a multi-cultural city and the ethnic Chinese population has a long tradition of living harmoniously with people of other ethnic and cultural background. At the same time, we have among us many local non-Chinese and members of the ethnic minorities who have demonstrated achievements and contribution to society and are well respected by other members of our community.

On the issues raised in the Motion, we believe that Members and the Government share a common objective and broad direction. On specific measures proposed, there are some which we have already put in practice and achieved good results. There are, however, some others which, as I have mentioned, could pose difficulties or cause possible adverse impact on implementation. We therefore have reservations on them.

We shall continue our current practice to progressively promote racial harmony through public education and support services. This will be an on-going mission. We shall continue to improve as appropriate from time to time, and in the light of experience to be gained.

Ends/Wednesday, July 11, 2007

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