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Dear Editor

CIVIL SERVICE IS NOT AN IRON RICE BOWL

I refer to the letter "Civil servants have the best of both worlds" (ST, March 6) by Ms Maria Loh Mun Foong. Ms Loh said that civil servants enjoy the benefits of a relatively secure career but with an upside in pay nearly equivalent to that of the private sector. This is not true.

The Civil Service is not an iron rice bowl. Civil servants, like employees in the private sector, are assessed regularly and subject to strict performance appraisals. Those who do not meet job expectations are counselled and given an opportunity to improve. If they fail to do so, they are asked to leave the Service.

A number of government agencies recruit staff on a contract basis. This enables the organisation to assess the officer's ability and inclination for the job in the initial years. Only those found suitable for a longer-term career are employed on the permanent establishment.

Officers in the Administrative Service are subject to stricter requirements and higher expectations. They are deployed to demanding jobs and those who do not measure up to the high standards are asked to leave or transfer to another Service. Officers holding senior appointments serve fixed terms, at the end of which they are expected to step down from these appointments.

A portion of Civil Service salaries depend on the performance of the individual. Only officers who perform well are paid performance bonus. Those who just meet basic job requirements do not receive any.

Salaries are also pegged to private sector benchmarks, on the principle that equal responsibilities deserve equal pay, and that we must pay officers competitively to attract the quality of people we need. In practice, in an economic downturn, the salaries are adjusted downward quickly, as they did in 2001 after 9/11 and in 2003 during SARS. But in an upturn, they often lag the market in moving up.

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