

Ying's words opportunity to reflect

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Wednesday, 28 December 2011 10:20

After it was revealed that Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Taipei City Councilor Angela Ying (蔣瑩) had praised the Taipei City Government for hosing down a park in Wanhua District (萬華) to drive our homeless people — not quite the Christmas spirit — her comments and the issue of homeless people has set off intense public debate. While many have said that spraying the park with water on a cold winter evening displays a cruel lack of humanity, Ying does not, in fact, lack compassion — she has long worked for the welfare of prison inmates and is a board member of an animal protection association.

Yet, how could someone working to protect animal rights promote such cruel treatment of a disadvantaged group such as the homeless? Ying's subsequent apologies have done little to stem the wave of criticism.

Wanhua has long been seen as the “home” of the homeless, prostitutes and small-time gangsters, affecting community development. Lately, the number of homeless people has increased, making it more difficult to deal with them. It is understandable that concerned local residents have asked city councilors and the city government to deal with the issue. However, Ying's statements, both in the Taipei City Council and on her Facebook page, are brimming with prejudice and animosity, as just two examples show:

“Most homeless people in Wanhua drink and gamble every day, and some of them have HIV/AIDS”; and, “In the past few years, more than one of them [the homeless] have been executed. They have raped and killed several people; among them, the youngest, a three-year-old and a woman.”

Homelessness is a seemingly unavoidable issue for any society or urban metropolis. It does not represent the more glorious aspects of a society, but the homeless cannot be swept away or gotten rid of. People become homeless for many reasons: 1) they've stopped looking for a job following long-term unemployment; 2) they're looking for a job, but cannot find one; 3) they suffer from mental or physical impairment; 4) they oppose social norms, and so on. US studies have shown that homeless people are not necessarily low-income earners with a poor educational background, have a low IQ or have difficulties fitting in, nor have their family or social support networks necessarily broken down. Many used to be managers, engineers, accountants, lawyers or teachers who became homeless when their businesses failed, they were laid off or their families broke up — big blows that weaken their ability to cope and result in mental distress or psychological breakdown.

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Taiwan's economy has gone through major changes, unemployment has risen, salaries have dropped, the middle class has come under pressure, housing prices have shot through the roof and many people have lost their jobs and their homes. Anyone can lose their home, and according to data from the Ministry of the Interior, the number of homeless people in Taiwan increased by 67 percent over the past 10 years. This is both a terrifying number and reality. Still, the government has never dealt directly with the issue or tried to improve the situation. Instead, Ying urged authorities to "point the water hose at the homeless," reflecting a neglect of the government's duties.

The recent debate has made people take another look at the homeless. Ying has served as a mirror through which we can see the darker side of humanity, but her remarks also stirred a lot of compassion and hopes to lend a helping hand. The government should stop ignoring the issue by sweeping it under the rug and instead begin to work together with private organizations, churches, temple associations and community organizations to help the homeless through job counseling, mental health therapy, care placement, medical treatment and other means of social support, rather than viewing them as a cancer on society.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2011/12/28](#)