

Ko treating voters with contempt

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Taipei's outspoken surgeon-turned-mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), who last month launched the Taiwan People's Party, constantly has his foot in his mouth. Last week, he described Presidential Office Secretary-General Chen Chu (陳 Chu) as "a fatter version of [Kaohsiung Mayor] Han Kuo-yu (韓 Kuo-yu)."

Unfortunately, Ko's fat shaming of Chen is just the latest in a long line of chauvinistic invective directed at female politicians by their male counterparts.

Last year, Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Chairman Wu Den-yih (吳 Den-yih) was reported to have called Chen a "fat sow," while former Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) chairman Shih Ming-te (謝 Ming-te) in 2011 notoriously demanded that then-presidential primary candidate Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) reveal her sexual orientation, because she was single.

However, from another perspective, Ko's uncouth remark is yet another example that he will do and say almost anything in an increasingly desperate attempt to hijack the media narrative in his (as yet unofficial) bid for the presidency.

Ko's remark was a response to a clear piece of trolling by DPP Legislator Tuan Yi-kang (團 Yi-kang), who posted on Facebook: "Ko Wen-je is a Han Kuo-yu who did better in exams." This was a red rag to a bull. Ko jumped in feet first with an extravagant slur of his own, directed at Tuan's fellow party member, Chen. Ko's response to the ensuing media fracas is worth exploring, as it reveals his wider political strategy.

Ko has so far categorically refused to apologize for his remark, offering up a variety of excuses for his ad hominem attack. Speaking to reporters, Ko initially said his comment was due to a "rush of blood to the head," then tried to draw a line under the controversy by saying: "I've said what I've said and that's it."

When this did not work, Taipei's mayor attempted to obfuscate by drawing a bizarre comparison with his former profession, saying that words such as "fat, thin, short or tall" are mere adjectives describing a "condition."

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Stop the presses: There has been an awful mix-up. Ko was not mocking Chen. No, he was conducting a dispassionate assessment of her medical “condition.”

Ko then tried to play the victim card, lamenting that Taiwanese society often fixates on a single word that someone says and then labels it a “speech crime.” Ko said: “I hate it,” adding that if the word “fat” is forbidden, then it should be expunged from the dictionary.

The catalog of excuses demonstrates that Ko is yet again treating the public with contempt and insulting voters’ intelligence. Ko is of course a past master at deploying sophistry and adopting contradictory positions designed to love bomb both sides of Taiwan’s political divide.

A classic example occurred last month when, despite having previously given off strong pro-China signals, including stating on Aug. 24 that “both sides of the Taiwan Strait are one family,” Ko abruptly swapped his China hat for his Taiwan hat. Asked by reporters about the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, Ko warned of the “psychopath next door,” in a thinly veiled reference to Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平). Asked if he was referring to Xi, Ko laughed and said: “Do not get me in trouble.”

Ko’s apparent lack of clear principles, and his body shaming of Chen and refusal to apologize, will likely be a major turn-off for voters. Taipei’s mayor is rapidly burning through political capital.

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