

Defying the executive branch once again, the legislative caucuses of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) on Tuesday reached a consensus to ban “risky” beef products, including bone-in beef, offal and ground beef, from areas where cases of mad cow disease have been documented in the past 10 years.

This outcome is a stern rebuke for President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration, which in October said it would relax restrictions on beef imports — but without any political preparation. Not only was there no prior consultation with local health experts, but it was also in blatant defiance of a legislative resolution from 2006 that requires the Department of Health to submit a detailed report to the legislature before lifting bans on US beef.

At an unscheduled press conference yesterday, Presidential Office Spokesman Wang Yu-chi (王郁琦) said that after the legislative recess, Ma would form a task force of lawmakers, experts, civic groups and consumer groups to visit the US on a fact-finding mission.

An obvious question is why Ma did not think of this before acting unilaterally and negotiating with the US on lifting beef bans. Had he done so, he could have saved himself the embarrassment that has eventuated.

Ever since the health department announced the easing of restrictions in October, the legislature has been paralyzed by ongoing disruptions-cum-boycotts by the DPP caucus, which wanted to pass its own amendment to an act governing food hygiene.

The next question is whether anyone from the executive responsible for this political and diplomatic mess — say, National Security Council Secretary-General Su Chi (蘇起), who ought to be dealing with security threats, not food fights — will be held to account for the resources that have been wasted on this issue over the past two months.

The outcome on the legislative floor on Tuesday will teach Ma and his executive branch a lesson: Just because the KMT holds a majority in the legislature does not mean the KMT's legislative caucus will comply with Ma and the executive branch's agenda. Consultation within the party would now appear to be just as important as consultation outside it.

But it remains to be seen if the Ma administration will indeed treat this instability as a lesson. The litmus test of any newfound wisdom will be the progress of the proposed economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA), which the government has been pushing to sign with China.

The Ma administration to date has refused to entertain holding a referendum on the issue. There might be arguments justifying this position, but it is not clear that the government can tell the difference. If the government's motivation is simply one of unilateralism, then it won't be able to say that it wasn't warned when this issue degenerates.

Earlier this week, amid the brouhaha over whether Chinese envoy Chen Yunlin (陳雲林) was a

US beef as an ECFA litmus test

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“C-list” politician, Mainland Affairs Council Chairwoman Lai Shin-yuan (賴幸雄) said “there is no such thing as ‘A-list’ or ‘C-list’ in cross-strait exchanges because the [public is] the most important factor.”

So now the waiting game begins, as voters and politicians on both sides of the fence watch to see if the Ma administration will let the public be “the most important factor” in mapping cross-strait policy, or whether it is about to suffer another rebuke for forging ahead with an ECFA without anything resembling a domestic consensus.

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