

A few hours short of a whole week after the Accounting Act (會計法) was amended by the legislature, President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) apologized for errors in the legislation. This was a rare admission of a misstep from Ma and his administration.

But the apology created some confusion coming as it did a day after Premier Jiang Yi-huah (江宜樺) rejected a request for the Cabinet to veto the measure, which came from Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairman Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌). That day, an Executive Yuan spokesperson said Jiang had reiterated the Cabinet had no plan to veto the bill.

What a difference a day makes.

The abrupt about-face begs the question as to just what triggered it. It comes after a week-long display of passing the buck between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), the DPP, lawmakers and the Executive Yuan, all eager to distance themselves from what appeared to be a stunning combination of oversight and political conniving.

Ostensibly the amendment aimed to exempt several hundred professors from having their government research grants audited, after the discovery of accounting errors that left them open to civil, administrative and criminal liability. Given the conflicting rules and timeframes governing such grants, the idea seemed to be a good one.

However, the proposal was then expanded to cover elected officials who had misused their special allowances — though former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) was pointedly not included. Grouping such disparate groups together and claiming their mistakes were equal was quite a stretch. It looked more like a case of combining an idea popular with the public with one to aid political parties ahead of next year’s seven-in-one local elections. It is hard to equate buying equipment for research teams with officials dipping into public money for entertainment.

## **‘Sorry’ cannot fix institutional flaws**

Written by Taipei Times Editorial  
Saturday, 08 June 2013 12:03

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Such was the rush to get the amendment passed before the legislature adjourned, neither the Executive Yuan, which had vetted the proposal, nor lawmakers noticed that the word “teaching [faculty]” was missing, which meant academics remained open to prosecution.

It appeared as if the only winner would be former Non-Partisan Solidarity Union legislator and Taichung County Council speaker Yen Ching-piao (葉景鵬), who began a three-and-a-half-year prison term in February for using almost NT\$20 million (US\$668,500) to visit hostess bars and KTVs when he was council speaker more than a decade ago.

It is clear why the KMT is eager to get Yen out of jail. Though he was an independent lawmaker, his son, Yen Kuan-hen (顏寬恒), ran in and won January’s by-election to replace him as a KMT candidate. The Ministry of Economic Affairs had also picked Yen in 2010 to be one of its “ambassadors” to promote the yet-to-be-signed Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. Despite his years of legal woes, he remains a powerful force in Greater Taichung politics, and could help the KMT next year.

The other major problem with the amendment was that its passage was a deal worked out by just a handful of lawmakers — Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平), Vice Speaker Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱) and other senior members of the KMT, DPP, Taiwan Solidarity Union and People First Party caucuses. It was then rushed through a vote.

Unfortunately, it has become the norm in recent years for political grandstanding to delay passage of most bills before the legislature. Consequently, during the last few days of each session, lawmakers are in a frenzied rush to pass a handful of amendments. A “special” session (or two) is then held in the summer to pass a few more bills.

Shoddy writing, questionable politicking and rushed legislation do disservice to voters and the nation. Ma apologized yesterday and Su on Thursday, but it is unlikely those expressions of remorse will change the way lawmaking is done in this nation.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2013/06/08](#)