

President is all talk and no trousers

By Lu I-ming

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The meeting between President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairman Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌) last month was intended to resolve the conflict between the government and the opposition over the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in Gongliao District (貢寮), New Taipei City. Instead, it turned into a war of words and both men came out of it badly and were widely criticized by the public.

In a speech marking his sixth anniversary in office on May 20, Ma did not review all his promises of reform or his “6-3-3” campaign pledge — annual GDP growth of 6 percent, an unemployment rate of less than 3 percent and an annual per capita income of US\$30,000.

Instead, he gave a monologue aimed at the younger generation, talking extensively about his five responses to demands on issues such as the gap between education and employment, youth entrepreneurship, housing justice, free-trade policy and youth participation in the decisionmaking process, but his responses were devoid of content.

At the press conference, Ma went on the attack, leaving out neither the opposition nor the student protesters as recipients for his venom.

The most serious of the five issues is the gap between education and youth employment. The government lacks a comprehensive, integrated policy: Instead, the education system, academic research and development, industrial transformation and public infrastructure all develop in isolation from each other.

For example, the policy of establishing a large number of universities has resulted in the commodification of education. Students are awarded degrees, but have no technical or research skills. This has resulted in a vicious cycle of outdated industries, low pay and unemployment.

The new 12-year national education program is yet another example of the government groping in the dark and substituting temporary solutions for policymaking.

Second, on the subject of youth entrepreneurship, Ma cited the 4-Way Voice (四方報) newspaper and Siaolin Village Reconstruction Committee director Tsai Song-yu (蔡松諭) as examples, although he has not given them any concrete assistance. 4-Way Voice, which is published in Vietnamese, Thai, Indonesian, Filipino and Khmer, is published by Shih Hsin

University. Money is tight and its parent publications — Taiwan Lihpao and Pots Weekly — have ceased publication due to a lack of funds.

Ma lauded Tsai, who lost family and friends in the Siaolin Village landslide when Typhoon Morakot struck in August 2009, but managed to get back on his feet. However, Ma chose to ignore the plight of the villagers whose NT\$590 million (US\$19.5 million) claim for national compensation was defeated in court.

Third, Ma had criticized former premier Frank Hsieh (謝長廷) for wanting to introduce social housing in Greater Taipei that would only be available for rent, saying it was the wrong approach. Now the president is claiming the idea as his political achievement, saying he is providing justice in housing by providing homes that young people can afford.

However, it takes actions to achieve justice. Data from the Ministry of the Interior show that in the fourth quarter of last year, the average housing-price-to-income ratio in Taipei was 15.01, which means that anyone who wants to buy a house in Taipei will have to forgo food and drink for 15 years to do so. The ratio for New Taipei City was 12.67:1, while the average nationwide was 8.37. Still, big business continues to buy land and drive up housing prices. Ma's attack on housing prices is just for show.

Fourth, Ma continues to put his faith in numbers while ignoring public suffering. Quoting the US think tank Cato Institute's Misery Index, he said that Taiwan is the third-least miserable country, ranking ahead of the UK, the US, Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong and other countries. Does anyone believe that? Ma says that the basic wage has increased every year for four consecutive years, but does he know that these tiny increases have all been eaten up by inflation, rising commodity prices, higher fuel and electricity prices, increased national health insurance premiums and school tuition?

Fifth, Ma says that he will increase the participation of the young in decisionmaking by setting up a youth advisory task force in the Cabinet. This is ridiculous. The National Youth Commission used to be an agency under direct control of the Cabinet until it was transferred to the Ministry of Education. The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) also has a youth union. It is questionable how effective these organizations have been. In other words, rather than creating overlapping organizations, Ma should use policy and communication in his contacts with the younger generation. Anything else is just rhetoric.

Ma also quoted Alliance Culture Foundation chairman Stanley Yen (嚴長壽), who has said: "Taiwan has no shortage of people who are critical or can see the problems, what it lacks is people that are ready to roll up their sleeves and do some work."

A national leader should understand that even the smallest of actions can speak louder than the most grandiose of words.