**SCMP Article**

**Legco newbies need to watch what they say**

Now, of course, everyone knows her. She and her Youngspiration colleague Sixtus Baggio Leung Chung-hang changed the wording when taking their oaths of office for Legco two weeks ago. Among other things, they replaced the word for China with “Cheena”.

In Singapore, it is a tongue-in-cheek anti-mainland slur. But it is also associated with Japanese anti-Chinese militarism. Either way, it is potentially hurtful.

Lingnan puts special stress on developing good judgment, respect for others and effective communication. I would have thought that anyone with experience at a liberal arts college would think carefully about the use of language that potentially angers and upsets other people. Many students and faculty at Lingnan and other campuses will have heard about the controversies in US universities over free speech. What are the limits – where does offensive language become hate speech?

It might seem absurd to advise people (as a university in Colorado has done) to avoid words like “ghetto”, “illegal immigrant”, “crazy” or even “guys”. But promoters of such policies have a point when they say these words can hurt because they are inaccurate. They say the idea is to encourage people to be aware of how caring about the real meaning of words can improve civility.

So this is partly about being thoughtful and considerate to others. In Hong Kong’s badly divided political scene, this is asking for a lot.

Many in both pan-democrat and pro-establishment camps saw the two Youngspiration members’ remarks as at least childish, if not seriously offensive. There is now a major split over whether they can retake the oaths. Some observers call the situation a constitutional crisis.

The conflict is intensifying. The uproar over the oath-taking has led members of both sides to use deliberately insulting and provocative language. It is far worse than anything that happened when I was in Legco. There is a real possibility that Legco’s division will become deeper and harder to mend. The last two council meetings were suspended. Will that happen again next week? The week after?

Even when the court hears the government’s application, it might put the proceedings off to a later date. Or, if the court hands down a judgment, there could be an appeal. Even if we get a quick and certain outcome to the judicial review, one camp in Legco will still be unhappy. Will they continue with walkouts or other action to disrupt the council’s work? How will Legco play its part in solving issues like housing and poverty if it is divided by this sort of bitterness?

And of course this division will be reflected in the wider community, between voters who sincerely supported – and maybe still support – candidates from one side or the other.

I was hoping for a better start to the new Legco. If younger, more radical new members continue to use offensive language, I can see no way out. However, they could indicate that they will moderate their language. That would be a mark of maturity and respect for others, and it would put pressure on their opponents to calm down. Everyone would benefit.