

有口難言

you3 kou3 nan2 yan2

Public administration is difficult, because there are so many competing interests to balance and opposing parties to please. The hardest part is that in many cases, being candid is not an option.

So when government officials do things that fly in the face of reason and logic, and offer explanations that are even more absurd, one cannot help but wonder whether they are in a situation of “有口難言” (*you3 kou3 nan2 yan2*), which is, at least, better than entertaining the idea that your public servants are just dumb.

“有” (*you3*) is “have,” “口” (*kou2*) “the mouth,” “難” (*nan2*) is “difficult” and “言” (*yan2*) “words,” “speech” “to say.” Literally “有口難言” (*you3 kou3 nan2 yan2*) is “have mouth, hard to speak,” “hard to speak out even if one’s speaking abilities are intact.”

The idiom means “cannot bring oneself to mention

Idiom by Lon Yan

something,” “to find it hard or embarrassing to bring up a matter.”

And when people find themselves “有口難言” (*you3 kou3 nan2 yan2*), it is usually because they have “難言之隱” (*nan2 yan2 zhi1 yin3*) – “secrets or problems one doesn’t want to reveal,” “a hidden trouble that is hard to mention,” “a painful topic,” “a sore subject.”

The usual telltale sign of people getting stuck in such a predicament is “欲言又止” (*yu4 yan2 you4 zhi3*) – “to wish to speak but do not on second thoughts,” like the way a man would behave when his mother asks him something his wife told him to keep secret.

Terms containing the character “言” (*yan2*) include:

言語 (*yan2 yu3*) – spoken language

言論 (*yan2 lun4*) – opinions on a subject; a discourse

失言 (*shi1 yan2*) – a slip of the tongue; makes an indiscreet remark

言行 (*yan2 xing2*) – words and deeds