

74-year-old 'lion' shows his claws are as sharp as ever

By BERNARD FONG

IN his heyday, Sir Sze-yuen Chung was renowned as a lion among his fellow legislators, a reputation he then took to the Executive Council. Yesterday, the "lion" showed that his claws were as sharp as ever.

Attending an eight-hour "command performance" of the Legislative Council's Public Accounts Committee, 74-year-old Sir Sze-yuen alternated between indignation and amusement.

Occasionally patronising, always autocratic, he appeared before a new generation of councillors, not only answering questions on the University of Science and Technology's massive cost overrun, but also defending a reputation wrought from three decades of exemplary public service.

Angered that legislators half his age were impugning his motives, Sir Sze-yuen declared from the outset that his judgement was never affected by a conflict of roles or interests.

With an engineer's knack for accuracy, he chided Mr Martin Lee Chu-ming for failing to master the niggling details of his brief which, admittedly, the lawyer had taken on at short notice.

But for eloquence, no witness surpassed the skills of former director of Architectural Services, Mr Jose Lei Meng-can.

Borrowing an analogy used by Sir Sze-yuen at a Rotary Club luncheon, Mr Lee asked the retired architectural expert whether the Government was not concerned about costs when a person who could otherwise only afford a Ford was con-

templating buying a Rolls-Royce because someone else was footing the bill.

Mr Lei countered that a better metaphor was that the Government was a passenger on the back seat of a taxi and the driver was the Jockey Club, who had been told the destination by the university (sitting in the front seat) but was free to choose the route.

The duel of the day was between Sir Sze-yuen and Miss Emily Lau Wai-hing, whose mutual antagonism date back to the time when he was senior Executive Councillor and she was an assertive journalist. Four years ago Miss Lau confronted Sir Sze-yuen at a Jockey Club function promoting the third university, then at its conceptual stage.

When the journalist bluntly asked Sir Sze-yuen to explain the University Planning Committee decision to award a contract not to the winning entry, but to the loser, a startled Sir Sze-yuen opted instead to praise Miss Lau for her beauty.

Round one was over but round two will resume next week.

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