

## **PA withdraws Istana party invite to Tan Cheng Bock**

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***The Straits Times***, 8 February 2014

Former MP Tan Cheng Bock, who quit the People's Action Party to contest the 2011 Presidential Election, sparked a debate yesterday about the motives of the People's Association (PA), which had withdrawn its invitation to him to a yearly Istana party.

Dr Tan, an MP from 1980 to 2006, said he had been going to the Chinese New Year party for former and current grassroots leaders since 1980.

This year's event will be held tomorrow afternoon. It is not the same party as the one to honour the pioneer generation.

Yesterday, Dr Tan wrote about the incident on Facebook, prompting PA to issue a public apology for what it said was a mistake. The error arose because an old invitation list was used instead of a new one, PA's deputy chairman Lim Swee Say said.

Dr Tan's post, which garnered more than a thousand likes and shares, said that he received the invitation on Dec 27 last year.

Twelve days later, on Jan 8, Mr Lim, the labour chief and Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, called him to explain that a change of policy required the invitation to be withdrawn.

"He conveyed (that) to me by phone and e-mail. There was a change in 'policy' to invite only those ex-advisers to grassroots organisations, from the immediate past GE (2011). I did not fit into this category as I stood down in 2006," Dr Tan wrote.

Replying, Mr Lim said in a statement that it was "most unfortunate that PA made the mistake of using the old list instead of the updated list".

The list is periodically reviewed, he added, to let a wider base of people attend. It was last reviewed "a few months ago".

This time, instead of inviting all former grassroots advisers "repeatedly for 20, 30 years or more", the PA limited the guest list to only those who retired in the 2011 election, he said.

Mr Lim added: "We are sorry for the error, and this is why I phoned Dr Tan and the other affected invitees personally to explain the mistake, and followed up with personal e-mail to apologise again."

Dr Tan said he would miss his friends among the grassroots leaders at the party. "Last year, I had to be helped to get back into my car because the crowd kept me from moving forward."

Mr Lim took issue with Dr Tan's post: "I was heartened that Dr Tan very graciously accepted my explanation over the phone. So I am surprised he now brings this up publicly as an issue."

PA could not be reached for the names of others who were wrongly invited.

The Straits Times spoke to 10 MPs who retired before 2011.

One said former MPs are invited for one term, or five years, after they retire. Another said it depends on how active the former MP continues to be in grassroots.

Those invited this time included Mr Andy Gan, who served one term as MP till 2006, Mr Othman Haron Eusofe who served from 1988 to 2006, and Dr S. Vasoo, who retired in 2001 but continues as a second adviser to Teck Ghee grassroots.

Mr Loh Meng See, who retired in 2006, was not invited. He said: "You have to accept your time has passed, and cannot expect the invitation all the time."

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said that while the PA, as the event organiser, can decide who to invite and disinvite, this episode places the PA under greater scrutiny for its partisanship.

"It is therefore of interest and Dr Tan knows that... It is intriguing because of the issue of whether PA is partisan in its dealings as he knows the public sees him as someone who took on the establishment."