Murmurings

What's the story, Prof Woon?

Former Attorney-General Walter Woon answers rumours that have been swirling around him on his exit.

REPORT: EUGENE WEE and TAY SHU'AN

SOMETIMES, Professor Walter Woon wishes people could tell when he's joking.

When they can't, then all sorts of rumour begin to spread.

Like the murmurings over his stepping-down as Attorney-General (A-G) two weeks ago, just because he said in a media interview last week that he had "out-stayed his welcome".

"I was joking," Prof Woon said, enjoying a good guffaw while at it. "I was being facetious."

Prof Woon, who is now back at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Law Faculty, was responding to a commentary published in Today newspaper that dissected everything he said during his media exit interview.

In it, Asia Journalism Fellowship director P N Balji deduced that Prof Woon had rubbed up his bosses the wrong way during his high-profile stint as A-G, which led to his maiden two-year term not being extended.

Speaking to The New Paper on Tuesday about the speculation over his departure, Prof Woon said that some people had "the ability to add two and two together and come up with six."

When asked during his earlier interview with the Straits Times if he had annoyed "the powers that be", he said: "Best to leave before you outstay your welcome, although I think among some people, I've already outstayed my welcome."

**Misinterpreted**

Explaining the quote, Prof Woon said: "I was thinking more about the people I prosecuted rather than anything else.

"I've said what I wanted to say and people are reading into things."

Talks have been rife that Prof Woon, who turns 54 this year, was not asked to stay as A-G because of reasons ranging from how he did not gel along with his superior to his public spat with Dr Lee Wei Ling, director of the National Neuroscience Institute.

In his 90-minute interview with The New Paper, the affable former diplomat, who is also the dean of the newly launched Singapore Institute of Legal Education (SILE), took the time to debunk the speculation surrounding his departure in his snazzy new SILE office in a quiet corner of the Supreme Court.

For example, many had wondered why he chose to cross swords with Dr Lee in 2008 over the sentencing of renal magnate Tang Wee Sang for trying to buy a kidney.

In an article she wrote for The Straits Times, she had criticised the courts for jailing Mr Tang, who was suffering from kidney failure.
COMMENTS ON HIS EXIT

“I don’t know why people must go dig inside and analyse this and that...I think we should just leave it as it is. He has done his job. When all is said and done, he was a good Attorney-General.”
— Veteran lawyer Subhas Anandan, president of the Association of Criminal Lawyers

“I think we are speculating too much. At the end of the day, his two-year contract was up. He was called in to do a job for two years and now he’s moving on.”
— Lawyer Sunil Sudheesan

“It’s like a painting: Different people would interpret it differently, and some would choose to read between the lines. Prof Woon was really his own man, he was not afraid to speak up. In his own way, he did what he believed his office and justice demanded of him.”
— Assistant Professor of Law at SMU Eugene Tan

“Professor Woon has earned the respect of lawyers in Singapore. He is prepared to stand in the Court of Appeal to argue his causes and that indeed speaks volumes of the man and his other admirable qualities. The Law Society... appreciates the contributions that he has made to the legal profession.”
— A spokesman of the Law Society

“I was thinking more about the people I prosecuted...I’ve said what I wanted to say and people are reading into things.”
— Former A.G. Walter Woon (right) on a statement he made that sparked off speculation that he was asked to leave his post

Prof Woon responded strongly in the media in what became a war of words. Why did he see the need to fight that battle himself when a spokesman or other senior official would have been the norm? “One rule that I made was that I wouldn’t ask somebody to do something I wasn’t ready to do myself,” he explained, suddenly turning serious. “And for this kind of thing, the top fellow has to come up and say ‘Look. One law for everybody. You can’t have a DPP anonymously signing off on that.”

Standing up for beliefs

“It wasn’t meant to be high profile. But considering the person who was making the criticism, you can’t jolly well go down and ask somebody to go cross swords with her.” He added that he did it despite people around him telling him that it was a bad idea. “Some people say don’t do it. But how can you run a place when you say you’re scared that you can’t argue with certain people.”

Then there were those who speculated that he was making some sort of statement by leaving office on April 10, the last day of his term, instead of waiting until the next A-G, Senior Counsel Sundararaj Mieron, takes over on Oct 1. Solicitor-General Koh Jut Jiong is acting A-G in the interim.

Why didn’t he stay on to make the handover? “I wasn’t tanked,” he said. “My term was up in April. And nobody said anything.

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STREET TALK

A dreamer who is serious about job

COMMENT: EUGENE WEE
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I KNOW what you’re thinking. You’ve just read what former A-G Walter Woon had to say about the speculation over the reasons that he wasn’t asked to stay on as Attorney-General (A-G). But you still have that nagging suspicion that he is no longer the A-G because he did not get along with his bosses.

Is there something Prof Woon isn’t telling us? Was he hiding something during his interview with The New Paper? From our time talking to him, it didn’t seem like it. In his media exit interview with The Straits Times published last week, he said the A-G job was always something he neither “wanted nor enjoyed”, that he was doing it because “it had to be done”.

It’s hard to doubt this sentiment during the 90-minute interview. He was all smiles when he spoke about how he could now take holidays, how he could finally go on movie dates again with his wife and read French graphic novels. In a dreamy sort of way, he would talk about how he planned to write more, loved that he now had time to just sit down and “think” about academically interesting legal cases instead of having to deal with them, and how he openly missed interacting with students.

But whenever the topic changed from the job to what the job represented, the smile was replaced with the kind of look that told lawyers this was not a man you wanted to mess with in court.

When talking about legal issues facing Singapore, such as the dearth of talent wanting to join the legal service and defending our mandatory death penalty, he spoke with the kind of passion that showed how serious he was that they were things that “had to be done”.

When all a well-choreographed act to put out the fires caused by his comments published in the exit interview?

It didn’t come across that way. Only twice did he decline to answer our questions—one on what transpired between the PM and him during a meeting earlier this year to discuss the end of his term (“It’s confidential”) and another asking to elaborate on an anecdote he gave about an inept lawyer in court. (“It’s not nice to name names.”)

Apart from that, Prof Woon was candid, forthright, forthcoming and never shied away from sensitive questions. Still, there will be those who will be unconvinced, preferring to hold on to the “kicked out” theory when it could easily be a case of a man who wanted to do a job well, but not happy doing it.

Perhaps his bosses, understanding his unhappiness, decided to go with someone who could do just as well or better, and would be happy doing it.

Read it any way you want. From the looks of things, Prof Woon probably won’t lose sleep over it. He’ll be too busy enjoying his new life to be bothered.

SORRY

LTA acts to deter CDJ speculation (TP, yesterday). The validity period of Categories C and E is 2 months. For Categories A, B and D, the validity period is 6 months.
Doing his job out of a sense of duty

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about staying. And I never thought about staying on. And the matter wasn’t even raised.”

Prof Woon said the Prime Minister had asked to see him at the Istana earlier this year
to ask about the matter. It was that the matter had been raised.

“I didn’t think it was appropriate to have asked to see him, because it was about time to
talk about the matter.”

It was there that he learned that Mr. Menon would be taking over from him as A-G.

“His reaction was that it was okay, fine,” he said.

Business as usual

“Basically, it’s business as usual. I was happy. It was what I always expected. It hadn’t
been that way, but I don’t expect it to change.”

Would he have stayed on as A-G if the
Prime Minister had asked him to, perhaps even for another term?

“Not necessarily. If the PM had asked, I would have thought about it.

“You ask me now that I’ve come outside and enjoyed it, I would say no. I definitely
would not because I don’t think it’s something I enjoyed.

“I would have done it out of duty as I did before as an NMP. Not because I enjoyed it, but
I thought it had to be done,” said Prof. Woon, who served as a Nominated Member

Still, even though he is no longer an A-G, members of the Government are still engag-
ing his help on a number of matters.

For example, Prof Woon said that Finance
Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam has
asked him to stay on as chairman of the
steering committee that is reviewing the
Companies Act.

He is also helping Minister for Defence
Seah Kian Peng and his team to work on a Bill
to amend the Maintenence of Parents Act
(MOA). The MP was first tabled by Prof
Woon as an NMP in 1994.

Despite still contributing where he can, and even though he felt “honoured” to be asked to
serve for that one term as A-G, Prof Woon said there was almost no chance he
will get back in the hot seat.

“I can’t think of anything that would induce me to come back,” he said.

“When (former United Nations secre-
tary-general) Kofi Annan was here, he said
“You don’t realise how tired you are until you stop doing it.” And he’s right.

“When you’re doing it, you’re doing it because you know it needs to be done. Then
you stop and you realise, suddenly I can take a holiday without worrying about the state of
the world… I can go with a free mind. Then
you ask me to give this up?

“Finally, I can get back to writing, which I’ve been meaning to do. And you ask me to
give this up?”

“That’s why I can’t think of any circumstances that I would voluntarily do that again.
Perhaps if you ask me five years down the
road, maybe. But I can’t imagine wanting to
do this job again.”

Life after A-G stint: Prof Woon
says ‘I’m scandalously free’

/TOMORROW