VARIOUS INTERESTS: New NMPs (from left) Siew Kum Hong, Edwin Khew, Thio Li-ann and Jessie Phua will give voice to their various concerns in Parliament, from legislation on the Elected Presidency to animal welfare, manufacturing jobs, and the benefits of every Singaporean getting involved in sports. -- TERENCE TAN

Feb 9, 2007

Looking to advance the debate

Last week, Insight featured three of the seven new NMPs, who join two incumbents in the House. This week, LYNN LEE and SUE-ANN CHIA find out how the remaining four want to add to public debate

Thio Li-ann: Previously critical of NMP scheme, she's now willing to 'eat my words'

WHEN law academic Thio Li-ann was 15 years old, she wrote an English composition on why Singapore needed an opposition party.

'At that time, I remember being really upset about the graduate mother scheme,' she says, referring to the 1984 scheme to encourage better-educated women to have more children.

'I thought it was so incredibly offensive... I think that was my first political awakening,' says the former Singapore Chinese Girls' School student.

The daughter of Dr Thio Su Mien, the first woman dean of law at the National University of Singapore, grew up in a learned household.

In her teens, she met and was inspired by the late David Marshall, the lawyer, politician and ambassador.
'What impressed me was that he was almost larger than life. He had such a passion and I figured, 'I must have passion too.'

Passion prompted Dr Thio to put herself up as a Nominated MP, with the backing of NUS, where she now teaches.

Her promotion to full professor in July last year made her feel she could devote time to this cause, without hurting her career advancement.

Dr Thio says NMPs play an important role in scrutinising and debating public policy.

In a parliamentary democracy, the ideal political check is the possibility that if a government governs badly, it can be replaced by an alternative government at the next election.

The NMP scheme does not offer that, but at least gives voice to alternative non-partisan views which may not otherwise be aired, she argues.

Her stance on the NMP scheme is an about-turn from her critical views of the scheme in her earlier work.

So, the fast-talking, witty professor, who counts playing the electric guitar among her hobbies, titled her NMP application essay, 'Why I am willing to eat my words: A personal motivation'.

Dr Thio, a graduate of Oxford and Cambridge universities in Britain, and Harvard Law School in the United States, is a constitutional law and human rights expert.

She wants to scrutinise legislation on the Elected Presidency, for example, and probe further into the mechanics and powers of the presidency.

And when the time is 'correct', she wants to ask if group representation constituencies (GRCs), which now have five or six MPs, are too big.

Originally, there were only three members, and the idea was to entrench minority candidates in Parliament, she notes.

Increasing the size of GRCs means fewer GRCs are needed, which could lead to fewer minority MPs, she says.

As an expert on human rights issues, she may come across to some as liberal, but she is the first to say she is no 'bleeding-heart liberal'.
Responsibility is a big thing in her scheme of things. 'I don’t believe we live solely for ourselves. I think we have responsibilities to our community, our family and maybe our state.'

A Christian, she advocates that religious values, as well as secular values, have a place in public debate.

'That to me is free debate,' she says firmly.

EARLY INSPIRATION

'What impressed me was that he was almost larger than life. He had such a passion and I figured, 'I must have passion too.'"

**DR THIO LI-ANN, National University of Singapore law academic, on meeting and being inspired by the late David Marshall when she was in her teens**