

Caution is the word

In meeting the supply crunch, steps should be taken to make sure the moves don't end up with long-term adverse consequences.

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ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

A fiery NMP gets her baptism of fire

She is the woman at the centre of a stormy debate over gay men and their sex lives. Nominated MP Thio Li-ann has made headlines for her stance against repealing Section 377A. Who is she? Why does she feel so strongly about this issue? Li Xueying finds out



She has been called a homophobe, a bigot, and not least of all, a fundamentalist.

Others viewed her tirade as a "hate speech".

So is she a right-wing Christian, you ask her straight out.

"I am a Christian," says Prof Thio who attends an evangelical church in the eastern part of Singapore. She declines to give its name but says it is an "independent non-denominational church".

"I don't know what right wing is. This is funny because I was always considered a political leftie and now I'm a rightie."

"There's a proverb I like. It says: 'Examine the contents and not the label.'"

'Innocence lost'

SITTING down with her for an interview that stretches beyond an hour, you soon realise that whether you agree with her views or not, the 39-year-old, who is single, is personable.

She is likeable. She is funny. She arms herself with self-deprecating wit. During the photo shoot, you suggest jokingly that she strikes the thinker's pose.

"I'll look like a pretentious snott!" she responds in mock horror. "I've been called so many names, I'm not going to give them more fuel!"

And while she is clearly very knowledgeable - she was "very heavily into philosophy" and Friedrich Nietzsche, Herbert Marcuse and John Stuart Mill were part of her reading diet - she also tries very hard to come across as your everyday gal.

For instance, she confesses to how in her college years, she "had a big, big weakness for very handsome men with brown hair".

"It was the whole stupid Mel Gibson phase in my life, which all my friends know because they couldn't bear to watch Lethal Weapon with me because I'd shout stupid things," she says with a laugh.

Musing on the events of the past month, she agrees she has "lost her innocence".

» On whether Prof Thio "counsels" her gay friends. She has two, both Americans

"To the extent they'll listen to you. But sometimes you shout too much at someone, they get deaf. Sometimes you just love them by just accepting them. But they know your view. The whole point is if I had alcoholic friends, I'd love them in spite of their...but I wouldn't be such a lousy friend as to say 'alcoholism is okay'."

» On the reactions of the other MPs after she delivered her parliamentary speech

"There was an overwhelming sense of relief that I had said what I had said. So maybe one of the functions of the NMP is because we are not so much weighted by considerations of political niceties because we have no constituency. Our constituency is to our conscience and our truth and our own reputations in putting forth what we hope will be considered credible arguments."

» On whether she and her mother influence each other. Dr Thio Su Mien, a former law dean, has written several letters to newspapers taking a hardline stance against homosexuality

"Do you know my mother? Yes, we do share the same views on this, not surprisingly, but my mother is an independent actor as far as I'm concerned. Of course we discuss it over dinner 'Hey, have you read this article? Don't you think it's stupid?' But, you know, there are a lot more interesting things in life to discuss than that."

» On why she thinks religion should have a part to play in public policymaking

"Every public policy issue has a moral basis and religion does influence the morality of many people. People could argue atheism influences morality as well, so we're going to go back to the whole issue of which morality. I'm tired of people arguing 'Thou shalt not legislate morality'. That is a red herring. As all laws are based on morality of some sort, the question really is: What morality should we legislate?"

"This is my baptism of fire," she says. "Eight months ago, I was a happy, quiet academic, writing my little articles that no one ever knows (about) except the poor 200 students who must sit for my exams. And maybe three academics abroad."

But with the hate mail she received since her Section 377A speech - at its peak, she was getting 25 to 30 a day - she clearly feels victimised.

"I am just cautioning self-restraint for myself. But I don't necessarily mean that you can go all your way out to provoke me because as a human being, you have limits. So I'm trying very, very hard to be gracious but I'm going to tell you it's not easy."

But she fired the first salvo with her speech, you point out.

No, she declares. "I think that's a completely wrong conception. The other side pushed the issue. If they had not so aggressively petitioned, so aggressively debated it in the press and in cyberspace, most people wouldn't have cared."

In fact, she "would have preferred to stay out of it", she claims.

"But because of all the spurious arguments that were being put out over the airwaves, in the newspapers, how could I sit by and just let a whole lot of what I consider untruths and propaganda float?"

While her explicit description of anal sex - like "shoving a straw up your nose to drink" - has elicited disapproval, she dismisses such sentiments as "hypocritical".

"You think about it. Why do you have an offence of gross indecency?"

"Because it creates a sense of moral opprobrium or repugnance. It's shocking and we can't put it into words but the truth of the matter is we do instinctively feel certain things are repulsive. I could easily say, do you pour butter into a car. So straw up the nose."

Meanwhile, she is frustrated her "reasoned" arguments have been obscured by the "colourful" bits. She is also uneasy by what she perceives as attempts to paint her as a distraught, emotional speaker.

"I was passionate but I speak that way," she says. "You may disagree

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with the premises but I would say look at my arguments, tell me that they are irrational, tell me that they're not legally sound and you want to contest it on a legal basis rather than saying, oh, you're so rude.

"I find it ironic that homosexual activists say it's a Victorian and archaic law and then when someone talks about straws, they become so coy and Victorian themselves."

There's a choice

THROUGHOUT the interview, Prof Thio does not use the word "gay", plumping instead for "homosexual".

The latter, when used as a noun, has pejorative overtones as it is a throwback to the era when homosexuality was seen as a mental illness.

Her choice of words is deliberate. "I take the position that there is a degree of choice. Someone said you might have a genetic predisposition but we all know we don't act on our impulses," she says.

"You could have the *hiao* gene, right? It doesn't mean you sleep with every man you come across. There is some degree of control, some degree of choice. And yes, the social environment will condition it."

"So my fear is if you've an increasingly permissive society, which we are seeing, then people will just continue with sexual experimentation and it's going to harm people."

But why spend time waging war on homosexuality and not on another "sexual morality" issue that affects far more people, say, prostitution?

While saying that she is not a "one-issue person", Prof Thio adds: "Because it's been so weakly rebutted."

"I really have done a lot of research and I really do think that the homosexual agenda is very dangerous."

"The agenda will not stop at repealing 377A. It will go on because first and foremost, the online petition said so - we don't just want to be tolerated, we want to be endorsed."

"When you cross the line from tolerance - which means I disagree with you, keep your distance but live and let live - to endorsement and celebration, it becomes coercion, it becomes tyrannical."

In other countries for instance, there are "homosexuality training workshops", and same-sex unions, she says. "People are being forced to rent out apartments to homosexuals whether or not you are a conservative Muslim or Christian or Jew and you don't want to."

She says that she is "not against homosexual people". In fact, she has two gay friends, both American. One has "left" the community, and the other "never came out and struggles with it", she says.

Spark of defiance

IT IS almost a certainty that Prof Thio will henceforth be largely defined by the public as the "anti-gay NMP".

This despite that as an academic and as a parliamentarian, she has contributed incisive articles and comments on a wide range of subjects - from constitutional law to civil liberties and human rights, from the elected presidency to ministerial pay.

While perturbed by this, a spark of defiance remains.

She says: "My students know what I'm like as a person. They know the risks I took, stood up in the past and being critical of Government...I've always spoken my mind. Why do you expect me to shut up now and be excessively polite?"

"If people want to define me in some way, that's fine, because at the end of the day, this public thing will end soon enough. You want to remember me that way, it's fine, but at the end of the day, it's people who love you that matter, people who know you."

"So people who have a certain perception of me, well - God bless them."

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