

The cynical idealist

Two years as NMP has unearthed the patriot in Thio Li-ann

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FOR law professor Thio Li-ann, her time in Parliament was as much a journey of self-discovery as a ringside seat to the best and worst of human nature.

And as she mulls over the decision of whether to reapply for a second stint as a Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP), one can assume that her remarkable maiden experience — scarred by a death threat — is weighing heavily on her mind.

Not least the controversy over the Parliamentary debate on Section 377A of the Penal Code, which has evidently left a bad taste in her mouth.

Annoyed with how the media singled her out for her arguments against repealing the clause which criminalises homosexual acts, the insults and death threat that followed were even more “disgusting” to Prof Thio, a straight talker who make no apologies for speaking her mind with reason and passion.

She recounted: “At one stage, I was really struggling with a lot of anger.”

The whole unsavoury episode merely confirmed her view that humans “are capable of both good and evil”, Prof Thio said. “We’ve always known this but being in Parliament intensifies things because you no longer can lead a quiet life.”

In deciding against taking legal action against the perpetrators, Prof Thio, who has in her academic writings asserted that politicians “must be thick-skinned”, felt she was merely living up to what she preaches.

In doing so, she also gained a far more valuable lesson in life.

“I think I’ve learned about forgiveness more than anything else (during my NMP term). It is such a strange lesson for an academic to learn ... I hope it stays,” she said.

And it was during her joint motion in August to urge the Government to tweak the laws on by-

elections that Prof Thio herself was moved by an act of grace.

Then, Prof Thio had called for a division of votes — a parliamentary procedure which requires the vote of each MP to be recorded — but she was one vote shy of the five needed for her request to be acceded to.

As she looked around, feeling embarrassed, a hand was raised among the Ministers seated in the front row opposite her — that of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who had unequivocally objected to the motion in his speech earlier.

“He put up his hand and just said ‘okay’. It impressed me a lot. I saw something that was pretty gracious.” In the end, the motion was defeated by 62 votes to five.

Apart from the failed motion, Prof Thio’s well-researched and often provocative speeches have made quite an impression, although they have come to nought as far as tangible outcomes are concerned.

As a keen student of history — and for someone who had thought the Cold War would “last forever” only for the Berlin Wall to fall a day before her exams at Oxford — she understands better than anyone that ideas don’t gain traction overnight.

Said Prof Thio: “Even if you are rebuffed, the persons who are rebuffing you have to think very carefully why they are rejecting your proposal ... Someone once said that even if you know you are going to lose, you must just keep speaking because today’s orthodoxy can become tomorrow’s heresy.”

The self-professed cynic and one-time critic of the NMP scheme — she still has her reservations towards it — has her time in Parliament to thank for her unlikely transformation into a born-again patriot.

Said Prof Thio: “The thing that shocked me, and probably my students, the most is I realised I’m more patriotic than I thought I was. I always thought I was a cynic ... I often tell my students a cynic is a disappointed idealist. But you see, the ideals are still there.”

Almost sounding apologetic, she added: “I know I kind of seem to swerve from being idealistic to realistic ... but that’s life.” WEEKENDVTRA

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