

SHE IS THE personification of three minorities in Parliament. Despite it being her second term in office, she remains the youngest, female, opposition party MP. Fresh-faced and just a little flushed, Fong Po Kuan has rushed from a DAP press conference hosted by Lim Kit Siang at Parliament to meet us at noon.

The venue is the Suhakam HQ on Jalan Raja Laut in Kuala Lumpur. DAP Socialist Youth (DAPSY) of which she is Vice Chairman, is lodging a memorandum of protest to a Suhakam Commissioner. She signals to us to wait as she brings herself up to speed. Apparently, the authorities had called in the Federal Reserve Unit to disperse a non-violent protest at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia the day before.

Youth and politics is a Fong Po Kuan bread and butter. Her voice goes up half-an-octave: 'I think the government should stop that - putting fear into our young people. Let them be independent, let them have a balanced view, be creative, speak up (and) allow them space and back [off]. Sometimes I wonder, don't you find it a bit weird that if you're smart and intelligent, you have lesser rights, you can't be involved in politics, you can't speak up because you're in university and if you're not studying in a local college or university you have all the freedom to talk; don't you think that there's something very wrong?' She refers, of course, to the University and University Colleges Act that forbids student participation in politics, whatever that word means.

'How much are you taught about politics [in school]? You are taught about the buildings and the institutions of it, that's it. Are you taught about election? ...the role of an opposition? The role of a government? And the importance of it? ...You'll be disappointed that many do not know,' she laments of feckless youth.

She shakes her head. 'You'll be surprised that, I have [young] friends who actually called me up to ask, Oh I need your assistance to sign some documents. You are an exco right?' They thought she held a Cabinet position.

We must get to the root of the ignorance. She cites a recent visit to a National Service (NS) camp, 'We [Po Kuan and other DAP members] asked them, Were you taught about politics? And they said, no. Were you taught about the opposition? We saw that they were having an activity with someone acting the role of kerajaan. But there was no role of an opposition.' And she heard it said that 'Oh this your country, you should protect and chase away the orang asing.'

Bad foreigners, we nod. Fong adds her observation on instilling patriotism in NS

camp: 'Ya, it's not like give someone three months and you can teach somebody to love the country. How do you expect to love the country when the policies are not right? We must make them feel they belong and the country loves them. You can only inculcate this from young, not in three months...you'd be surprised that during our public hearing, a former trainee, a Chinese girl came and said she was taught, 'during our camp, Don't ask what the country can do, for you but ask yourself what you give to the country.' Po Kuan would meet her again. How was she? asked the MP, and what was she doing now. 'She said said nothing. She couldn't get a place in a local university. And she cried...'

Po Kuan did 'average' for STPM (the equivalent to A levels) but 'knew [she] would get a place in the local university but not [into] law course like UM (University Malaya) because of the quota system - you know you have to get 4As or something to get to do law at UM.' She also wanted a campus life, so she picked International Islamic University (IIU).

Po Kuan has lobbied hard in Parliament over the mandatory wearing of tudung in universities. She tells us about Foo Yueh Jin, a brave student in her alma mater, who were barred from her own graduation because she refused to wear the tudung.

Po Kuan, believe it or not, was not as outspoken as Yueh Jin when she was a student. She wore a head scarf for the whole of her four years there without question because she had 'no choice...We're minority, you know. I was just there for the education and just [to] complete my degree.'

Didn't she think that she could participate to change things? 'It never occurred in my mind to actually change things until I left university...'

But the seeds of her public life were sown much earlier. Her father brought

her to DAP functions as he was an active member. Still, upon graduation, she had been very keen on a legal career and it took consistent persuasion from the DAP powers-that-be for her to contest in the 1999 election.

Soon, she was running for a second term. It was a glorious victory. In the General Elections of 2004, she defeated rival Ong Ka Chuan, the current secretary general of MCA and brother to its President, Dato Seri Ong Ka Ting.

Any elation she feels on being re-elected, however, thuds back to earth every time she attends Parliament. She tells us that, yes, it can be the circus we read about. She endures all kinds of name calling.

'When they can't answer you, or they cannot accept [your debating] style, they just check you down and say, 'Ini budak kecil dari mana?' and make sexist remarks such as, Dia tu too emosi.'

She is aghast at the frequent lack of preparation for proper debate. 'If the government is not ready with the next bill, then they will be drag [the process]; just over a small amendment, they will be debating for two, three days - I can't name which MP. And when they are ready with other bills, they will speed [it] up to a bill for [every] half an hour...'

But what really irks her is the attitude of many in the ruling party: 'There are many times, whenever we raise [issues] about unfair elections, ISA, the minister would say: You say not fair then why are WE elected as government? If you are talking about unfair election, why are you sitting here? If you say unfair - you won't be here.'

It's a good thing she sees the absurdity in fledgling democracy - and has friends who administer reality checks. 'Whenever I bump into my university friends they say to me, whenever I see you you only talk about politics. When I try to talk about or highlight an issue, they say, Oh, you're still talking about politics.'

THE SECRET WEAPON

FONG PO KUAN

BY Chong See Ming & Jason Tan