

Freedom of expression, empty commitments and the importance of change were among the things I got to talk about when interviewing Ms Tricia Yeoh, CEO of IDEAS as part of my Stars & Steppingstones interviews.

After completing her Master's degree in Research Methods in Psychology at the University of Warwick, Ms Tricia Yeoh journeyed back to her homeland, Malaysia.

For the next 3 years, she would work with Dr Lim Teck Ghee on a social research project at ASLI Centre for Public Policy Studies (a non-governmental organisation). This was during a time of political turmoil, partially due to the economic crisis of 2008. What made a fresh graduate stay in a job like this? Ms Yeoh credits her 'penchant for adventure' and ability to be comfortable with moments of discomfort.

Making the jump from NGO to government sector was the next milestone in Ms Yeoh's career; holding the position of research officer to the Selangor Chief Officer (Menteri Besar).

She was able to directly influence the affairs of the Selangor State Government - but this power of influence came with its own set of challenges. Considering the position she held within a large institution, freedom of expression through writing became more limited for Ms Yeoh.

However, this came to pass as Ms Yeoh joined the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), where she currently holds the position of Chief Executive Officer. IDEAS is a non-partisan think tank that provides evidence-based policy recommendations to decision-makers.

The entire process begins, as it usually does, with an idea (no pun intended). After going through multiple rounds of research, applications and funding requests (which consist of restricted and unrestricted funding), a position paper is formed and disseminated to decision-makers.

NGOs, government sector, and think tanks. What are the differences between these three sectors of politics, and how has the experience of working in all of them shaped Ms Yeoh's view on politics?

The largest distinction lies in the exchange of freedom of expression for control of change (or vice versa). In NGOs and think tanks, one has the opportunity to speak freely and openly criticise existing policies (it is encouraged!), but control over concrete change is limited. Conversely, the government sector provides a platform for change-making but also has stricter sanctions that govern one's expression and speech.

Ms Yeoh considers politics a 'noble profession' that provides power to make a change. Her priority is always to push the needle forward, albeit how 'small' a change may be.

We concluded the conversation by talking about my experiences in a learner-driven education system and how it led me to the path I was on. Later (via email), Ms Yeoh was also kind enough to provide me with some resources to dive deeper into democracy and politics.

