

A crusader takes on a new mission

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SITTING in her office in Mu Kwang English School in Kwun Tong on Thursday after another hectic morning in the Legislative Council, Mrs Elsie Tu seemed philosophical about her role as the new convener of the Legislative Council in-house meetings.

Elected last Saturday by fellow legislators to chair the weekly informal meetings, she declined to speculate on why she was chosen to succeed former senior member, Mr Allen Lee Peng-fei who stepped down over allegations of conflict of interest.

Although many of her peers are young enough to be her children, the 78-year-old views her new role as an honour. At an age when most have retired, Mrs Tu has her work cut out for her.

Chosen largely because she is not affiliated to any political group on either the left or the right, she stands on her past record of fair-mindedness as well as being a good and sympathetic listener — qualities that will come in handy in mediating between the various factions in the chamber.

On one side are the liberals headed by United Democrats chairman, Martin Lee Chum-ing. On the other are the conservative business interests represented by Allen Lee, who is also founder of the Co-operative Resource Centre.

It was over the resource centre that Allen Lee stepped down as convener of the in-house meetings and in the process relinquished his role as senior member.

Somewhere in the middle are the independents such as Mrs Tu, in a loose-knit group without a fixed political abode. Had she been linked to any political grouping, it is unlikely she would have been chosen to convene the in-house meetings.

Despite her reputation as a champion of the underdog and crusader for justice, Mrs Tu has never developed a taste for party politics even though she has been linked to at least one.

Recruited by fellow councillors Dr Leong Che-hung and Mr Jimmy McGregor to join the Hongkong Democratic Foundation last year, she purportedly quit when she realised it was turning into a political party.

Then last month, she was considered to be behind a political group when she invited independent legislators to get together in what looked like a bid to counter the influence of the United Democrats and the Co-operative Resource Centre.

When suggestions were made that she was forming a third political force in the council, she balked and said that it was only a breakfast club which would never evolve into a party or a voting block.

A long-time resident of Hongkong, Mrs Tu is something of a legend. Few have fought harder or longer to right Hongkong's wrongs or help those who had nowhere else to turn.

Her tireless efforts over the years to weed out corruption in the police force, to fight the triads and name the guilty are well-documented in her book *Elsie Tu: An Autobiography*.

It is difficult to believe that the soft-spoken white-haired former missionary was once considered a thorn in the side of the Government because of her outspoken views in the bad old days against police corruption and government wrong-footedness.

As with so many mavericks, Mrs Tu has mellowed over the years, and acquired the mantle of respectability when she was

PROFILE

JUST when Elsie Tu was about to be written off as a well-meaning has-been, the 78-year-old legislator has been chosen for one of the most politically sensitive posts around as Legco adjusts to its new format. BERNARD FONG reports.



Elsie Tu: she has mellowed over the years.

awarded the Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1988.

More than one commentator observed several years ago that it should have been Mrs Tu and not Lady Lydia Dunn who deserved to be made a life peer — between the two she was more the saint and had done more for the ordinary people of Hongkong.

Despite her years of service to the public, she was not elected to the Legislative Council until 1985, when she became its oldest member at 74.

Born Elsie Hume in June 1913 in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, she was raised in a spartan, pious family.

She brought her Christian fundamentalist zeal to her evangelism in China until the communist revolution and Chinese xenophobia exiled her to Hongkong.

RATHER than return to England as her disillusioned husband did, she stayed because she felt there was another mission to complete.

As hundreds of thousands of refugees converged on Hongkong, they needed help. Even in those early days, Elsie Elliott as she was then known, raged against social injustices and corruption, singling out the police and government officials for her considerable wrath.

Three decades ago she and Andrew Tu, whom she married in the summer of 1985, set up an English co-educational school.

She and others like her eventually persuaded the Government to establish the Independent Commission Against Corruption and the Complaints Against the Police Organisation, both instrumental in delivering Hongkong from venality and abuse of power.

To reporters and other visitors, she is always amicable, reminiscing about the past. Physically frail, her mind is as lucid as ever.

She may abhor factional political squabbles in Hongkong yet she has been an ardent Labour Party socialist since her girlhood days.

But Mrs Tu feels no particu-

lar animosity towards anyone in the Legislative Council.

Over the years she has been an inspiration to many, some of whom are now United Democrats. The young speak of her in an awed tone for she was an icon of the 60s and 70s social activism.

She has high regard for Martin Lee Chum-ing's strong convictions but is critical of his penchant for taking the Hongkong issue to other countries, especially the United States.

"Hongkong is a matter for two countries, for Britain and China," she said sternly.

How much she identifies with the Chinese people is reflected in her conversation. Mrs Tu invariably addresses the Chinese as "our cousins, brothers, sisters".

She was the one who urged others in the Legislative and Executive Councils to donate \$50 million for flood relief in China which ultimately swelled to a \$800 million effort from the rest of Hongkong.

Mrs Tu refuted the allegation that the money was raised not just to succour the Chinese along the Yangtze flood plains but to buy legitimacy for the Legislative Council which the Beijing Government did not, and still does not, recognise.

What is most amazing about Mrs Tu in her various incarnations — as missionary, school headmaster, Urban Councillor and social activist — is that she has achieved so much not with strident demagoguery but compassion and compelling logic.

Mrs Tu simply converts others to her conviction by pointing out how easy it is to be civil and reasonable.

She will have to be the best shepherd if she is to guide the Legislative Council over the next four months. After that, a decision will have to be taken on who might replace her.

By then things should have settled enough for councillors to make a more permanent choice. Until then, if anyone can keep Legco proceedings from breaking down and legislators talking to each other, few are better qualified than Mrs Tu.