

HE WAS APPROACHED IN MAY BY MANPOWER MINISTER

ACRES founder Louis Ng announces move to join PAP

Analysts say it is unusual for activist to join party politics, but see no conflict of interest

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SINGAPORE – Mr Louis Ng, 36, best known as the face of non-governmental organisation (NGO) Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES), took the unusual route of announcing yesterday to a few reporters face-to-face and on social networking site Facebook that he has joined the ruling People's Action Party (PAP).

But as political analysts pointed out, there is nothing common about a leader of a combative NGO — which has often taken on large corporations and government agencies on the issues of animal welfare — joining the ruling party.

Mr Ng, who founded ACRES about 13 years ago, said he was approached in May to join the PAP by Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin, whom he had been helping in the Kembangan-Chai Chee ward. He took a month to decide.

"A lot of people were speculating ... and I choose to be upfront. I don't think there is anything for me to hide ... I don't think I want to start entering politics by hiding certain things," said Mr Ng, who had been working closely with Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K Shanmugam since 2008, helping residents at the latter's Meet-the-People Sessions in Chong Pang and serving on the ward's Community Club Management Committee, among other things.

While he acknowledged that some people could see a potential conflict of interest between his commitment as a PAP member and his work at ACRES, he said he did not think it could be an issue, noting that Members of Parliament such as Moulmein-Kallang GRC's Denise Phua have been passionate advocates for certain causes.

He added: "Regardless of which town council ... calls (ACRES), we will still respond ... If (members of opposition parties) want to volunteer at our rescue centre, we'll be open to it. We're not going to say no just because I'm with the PAP."

Political analysts whom TODAY spoke to agreed. Singapore Management University's Associate Professor of law Eugene Tan said: "I don't see



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Mr Louis Ng
ACRES FOUNDER, EXPLAINING WHY HE MADE THE ANNOUNCEMENT

how, just because he is now a card-carrying member, that would make the work that he has come to be known for more muted."

Still, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh noted that the common practice of NGO activism here has been to stay out of party politics. "NGOs tend to come across as being fiercely independent (and) adversarial in taking on government policies, so we sit up when a civic activist crosses over to the PAP," she said.

Mr Ng said he has no intention of stopping his work at ACRES. Nevertheless, he is training new leaders. "ACRES is always (about) Louis and Louis equals ACRES — any organisation that works that way is doomed to failure," he said.

Dr Koh said that, ultimately, it is for ACRES members to decide whether the organisation and its founder have to part ways. Some members may want to avoid giving the impression that it has been absorbed into the PAP

and Mr Ng may want to build up a personal brand that extends beyond animal rights, she noted.

On whether he is keen to shake off his "animal activist" label, Mr Ng said it would take time. But he added: "If you know animal welfare, it's actually never about the animals. It's about how to engage people and change their mindset."

ACRES' aggressiveness in championing animal welfare — which came to the fore particularly in its engagement with Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) over dolphins in captivity — had split public opinion. But Mr Ng said he did not see "aggressiveness" as a disadvantage in politics, at a time when people are looking for politicians to speak up for them. Still, he stressed that ACRES has always gone about its work constructively.

In the case of RWS, the NGO had been meeting up with the company in closed-door discussions for a number of years. "We are always pro-engagement and, if all else fails, then yes, we'll have to launch a public campaign," said Mr Ng.

"We don't criticise RWS with no evidence or no facts ... that's what I hope to bring into politics also — that there can be arguments, but as long as we remain constructive."

On whether he will be fielded in the next General Election, which is due by January 2017, Mr Ng said time will tell and he hopes to learn the ropes first.

Mr Tan Chuan-Jin told TODAY that with Mr Ng having joined the party, whether he will be fielded or not "is a different matter altogether". The minister added: "We have many members and volunteers who come from different backgrounds, and that diversity is valuable as we see how best to help our community."

The analysts said they would not be surprised if Mr Ng is on the PAP's slate in the next GE.

SMU's Assoc Prof Tan noted that many people join political parties quietly and choose not to declare it. "(The manner of the announcement) raises the question of whether he's intending to take on a higher profile within the party," he said.

Veteran journalist P N Balji added: "I think for the next election, (PAP) will try to bring in people who have an affinity with the general public ... The choice of Louis Ng may be a sign of that."

Ng keen to bring passion for animal welfare to the community

SINGAPORE – Since starting Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES) with only an S\$8,000 donation in his pocket more than a decade ago, Mr Louis Ng has been playing a substantial role in bringing about landmark changes to the animal welfare landscape in Singapore.

Apart from clamouring for harsher penalties for animal abusers and attempting to end illegal wildlife trade, he has also worked closely with Minister for Foreign Affairs and Law K Shanmugam in the past five years in launching pilot programmes for the keeping of cats in HDB flats and ending the culling of stray cats in Chong Pang.

ACRES has also been organising the annual Chong Pang Forum on Animal Protection Policies with the Chong Pang Division since 2011. The forum has led to significant policy changes such as the proposed amendments to the Animals and Birds Act, in which penalties for animal abuse will be increased, among other things.

Citing the Chong Pang examples, Mr Ng said he has been working with People's Action Party (PAP) Members of Parliament and ministers, and that "the track record is that it has worked so far". "These pilot programmes really started because we worked closely with the politicians and I see that change can happen," he said.

While animal welfare will always be close to his heart, Mr Ng, who is married with an eight-month-old daughter, said he also wants to champion other causes, such as reviving the kampung spirit and helping less-fortunate families break the poverty cycle.

He hopes to encourage more dialogue between various parties in society, noting that "society is becoming very divided". "Hopefully, there can be a better bridge between the Government and civil society," Mr Ng said.

In an email response to TODAY, Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin said he asked Mr Ng to join the PAP "to help with the outreach on the various fronts", after seeing a number of projects such as those in Chong Pang and Project ADORE, a programme to rehome mongrels with families living in Housing and Development Board flats.

"I was keen to introduce some of these initiatives here in Marine Parade GRC, where we have quite a number of people who love their pets," said Mr Tan, who is one of its MPs.

"Louis cares a great deal for the community ... His achievement with ACRES has been very impressive. He has also brought that passion to bear in the work on the ground." **JOY FANG**