‘Quick thinking and decisive political veteran’

Tony Tan had long and distinguished career in public, private sectors

By Cassandra Chew

His trademark swept-back silver hair and dark-rimmed spectacles made former deputy prime minister Tony Tan instantly recognisable during his political career of close to three decades.

But those who have worked closely with the 71-year-old know him for another characteristic: His quick thinking and decisiveness.

As Education Minister, tasked in 1980 with the setting up of Nanyang Technological Institute (NTI), later known as Nanyang Technological University, Dr Tan would come up with solutions to problems within minutes, recalled NTI founding president Cham Tao Soon.

“He catches on to the problems very quickly, and once he is convinced that a solution is the right one, it is very difficult for others to change his mind,” said Professor Cham, 72, who is now chancellor and chairman of SIM University.

Former Sembawang GRC MP Ho Peng Kee, who served with Dr Tan in Sembawang for 10 years, added: “He exercises careful judgment in his decisions, which are ultimately his own.”

These qualities also won him praise from then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who revealed in 1988 that Dr Tan was his top choice to succeed him as PM.

“He has a quick brain, and there is a decisive quality about him. He listens, takes all points of view and decides,” Mr Lee said then.

At a press conference yesterday, Dr Tan said he had arrived at his decision to contest the upcoming presidential election “after much reflection”. He had also anticipated questions he was likely to be asked by the media, and arrived with a sheaf of prepared answers, which he read from at times.

Dr Tan’s wife Mary, 70, was by his side when he made the trip to the Elections Department to collect application forms for the Certificate of Eligibility. They have four children and five grandchildren.

Their daughter Ming is helping out with the campaign.

The son of a businessman, Dr Tan studied at St Patrick’s School and St Joseph’s Institution. At St Pat’s, he was head prefect, a first-class scout, and played table tennis, soccer and volleyball.

He was awarded a Singapore Government State Scholarship and earned a first-class honours degree in physics from the then University of Singapore. He also has a master’s in operations research from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a PhD in applied mathematics from the University of Adelaide.

He entered politics in 1979 and proved to be the fastest-rising star of the People’s Action Party’s second-generation team.

The MP for Sembawang was made senior minister of state (education) immediately after his election, and became education minister just 16 months later.

In his 27 years in political office, Dr Tan helmed five ministries and served three prime ministers. He even held the reins to three ministries – Finance, Education and Health – at the same time in 1995.

In 1991, he left the public sector to become chairman and chief executive of OCBC Bank, but was asked to return to Cabinet as deputy prime minister and minister for defence in 1995, three years after then DPMs Ong Teng Cheong and Lee Hsien Loong were diagnosed with cancer.

He was known to stand up to prime ministers on key policy issues, including the controversial graduate mothers’ scheme in the 1980s, which gave priority in school registration to children of graduate mothers. He scrapped the scheme in 1985.

As defence minister, he set up the National Security Coordination Secretariat, now helmed by DPM Teo Chee Hean.

As an MP, Dr Tan successfully reached beyond his wealthy family background to connect with Sembawang residents, who lived in farms, kampong shophouses, said his grassroots activists.

After Dr Tan stepped down from Cabinet in 2005, he was appointed chairman of Singapore Press Holdings and deputy chairman and executive director of the Government of Singapore Investment Corp.

He resigned from both posts yesterday, but still serves as a patron of several social and charitable organisations, including Singapore Dance Theatre, Dover Park Hospice and SJI International.

He is also chairman of the National Research Foundation.