THE People's Action Party's decision to pit an office-holder against a seasoned opposition player like Steve Chia has raised many eyebrows in Chua Chu Kang.

Why is the PAP taking such a big risk with Mr Gan Kim Yong, touted as a possible minister-in-waiting?

Similar attempts to field potential ministers in single-seat wards have backfired in the past.

Landmark opposition victories include Mr Chiam See Tong's 1984 victory against Mr Mah Bow Tan in Potong Pasir — Mr Mah was then group general manager (co-ordination) of Singapore Press Holdings and later went on to become Minister of Communications, Trade and Industry and National Development; and the 1991 unseating of Acting Minister for Community Development Seet Ai Mee by the Singapore Democratic Party's Mr Ling How Doong.

This time around, Mr Gan, 47, a 2001 inductee who won by walkover and rose meteorically to become Minister of State for Education and Manpower within five years, faces Mr Chia, 35, a three-time election combatant from the Singapore Democratic Alliance.

The pundits are speculating: Is this a high-risk experiment in blooding a high-flier?

But residents and political observers feel that this is no mindless bloodletting.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan notes that it is precisely because he is no lightweight that Mr Gan is being fielded on his own.

“The PAP sees a need for someone like Mr Gan to be in Chua Chu Kang — in terms of calibre, temperament and potential.

“I believe the PAP looked at its available slate of candidates and figured that Mr Gan is the best bet,” he says.

Mr Gan is also known to have an affable, down-to-earth personality that resonates well with the ground, says Mr Viswa Sadasivan, who chairs the political development feedback group associated with the Feedback Unit.

His fluency in Mandarin, Hokkien and Teochew is also another definite plus in reaching out to heartlanders.

Voters who spoke to The Straits Times echo this sentiment.

Housewife Julie Chia, 43, says in Mandarin: “He speaks well and he is sincere. I think he will do a good job.”

Mr Gan himself brims with a quiet confidence that stems from a conviction that he has heavy-duty backing.

“I’m alone but I’m not alone. I’m fighting alone as a candidate, but I’m not alone because the party is behind me and I have a very good team of party members fighting with me,” he said in a recent interview.

His rival Mr Chia, meanwhile, is wasting no time pressing his home-ground advantage.

He has been conducting daily house visits and has covered his ward twice over.

He says: “I am willing to work hard for the people, give my all to them. They have been giving me a warmer reception than I had back in 2001. My fate is in their hands.”

Unfortunately, in conservative Chua Chu Kang, he may have become famous for the wrong reasons since becoming a Non-Constituency MP five years ago, such as for taking nude photos of himself and sexy ones of his maid.