There are now at least five former government scholarship holders contesting in the upcoming General Election as part of the opposition.

Two are in the National Solidarity Party (NSP) and another two are with the Singapore People’s Party (SPP).

Even the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), which had previously struggled to attract good candidates, has one: Mr Tan Jee Say, a former principal private secretary to Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong. These formerly establishment types are widely seen as the top candidates for the opposition this election.

So the question arises: Why haven’t they joined the Workers’ Party (WP) – arguably the strongest opposition party this election?

It would seem rather strange since the WP has built a reputation of being a credible, solid party that appeal to the middle ground, and the middle ground is likely to be where such former government scholarship holders hail from.

To be sure, the WP does have its own star candidate in top corporate lawyer Chien Show Mao, who is probably more highly qualified than any of these scholarship holders.

But he is a Rhodes scholar who has succeeded in the corporate world. Thus, in terms of experience, he is not cut from the same cloth as these Government scholarship holders.

Why is it that these former scholarship holders have not joined the WP? Is the party losing out on what could be a possible longer-term trend?

The conspicuous absence of former scholarship holders in WP’s ranks probably boils down to three factors, say analysts.

The first is simply personal preference. Mr Benjamin Pwee, for example, a former Administrative Service officer, joined the SPP because he was invited by Mr Wilfred Lee, Mr Chiam See Tong’s close aide.

Mr Jimmy Lee, a former Defence Science and Technology Agency scholarship holder, joined the same party partly because of his friendship with Mr Pwee.

As one SPP party member quips: “You get two for one.”

A second, more significant, factor has to do with political beliefs. Former opposition member, Dr Wong Wee Nam, says that opposition parties are now more obvious and there is thus better to attract people with different leanings.

SDP’s newest and biggest coup this election, Mr Tan Jee Say, is one such example.

He made it quite clear during an interview with The Straits Times that he was out to contest against the ruling party as a result of his strong stand on specific policies he believed were wrong.

These include the setting up of casinos, the influx of foreign workers and the lack of a minimum wage in Singapore.

SDP, he said, had a clear stand on all of these issues and that was partly what attracted him to it, as opposed to other parties.

Says Dr Wong, “No one party right now is able to attract everyone, not even WP. This bodes well for a maturing political system as pluralism and diversity of ideas among parties is important.”

But the final, and possibly most important, factor is the WP itself. While it would seem natural for the best opposition candidates to be attracted to the top opposition party, the fact is that the WP leaders run a very tight ship, and that could have been a dampener for these high-flyers.

The SPP’s Mr Tony Tan is one example of a scholarship holder who joined the WP in early 2009, but left soon after to join the Reform Party.

Mr Tan did not respond to press queries about his move but an NSP insider said it was rumoured that Mr Tan felt WP was “too slow, too conservative with its approach” on many fronts, from online presence to debates with the PAP on policy issues.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan says some of these high-flyers are out to make a big impact in the coming polls. They may not be content, therefore, to follow the slower path to prominence that WP chief Low Thia Khiang seems to advocate.

Most of the WP candidates introduced so far have spent a year or more in the party. Even Mr Chen Show Mao had been with the party since 2007. “This shows that he (Mr Low) prefers team players,” notes Mr Tan.

Mr Low is also consciously trying to build a party around a WP brand, and seems wary of individuals who think they are bigger than the party or who expect special treatment, said a WP member, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

In the light of the attention that these former scholarship holders have attracted, does the WP policy make sense? Or is it an overly-cautious approach causing the party to lose out on recruiting some good talent?

Another WP member said: “I agree with this cautious approach. I think it’s better to have candidates who are in it for the long haul as a slower approach creates stability in the party.”

It will be interesting to see how the former scholarship holders perform come Polling Day, compared to other opposition candidates.

It will shed light on whether the WP’s instincts about these candidates were right, or whether it was a missed opportunity for the party in failing to recruit them.