

The role of a Shadow Cabinet Minister

I was a Shadow Cabinet Minister after the big election defeat of 1997. A Shadow Cabinet Minister does not draw an additional salary above the MP pay, unlike a Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, select committee chairmen and some other office holders. It is nonetheless an important second job for an MP, and crucial to proper scrutiny and Parliamentary debate of the main government departments. I think we need to hear more from various Shadow Cabinet members, given the actions of the government.

I found it a demanding seven day a week job as is being an MP. I set out to directly shadow the department I was responsible for. With my team of shadow Ministers and helpers we sought to anticipate the statements, problems and policy announcements of the department. Sometimes we would state in advance what we would do, sometimes we would warn against likely government actions. We aimed to be well briefed by the time the government made a decision or a statement. We also developed our own distinctive alternatives to government actions, identified problems they needed to solve and gave positive advice as well as criticism.

A volunteer joined the team and did a great job briefing the press. I generated a daily story or comment or proposal and she talked to the main newspapers every day on an individual basis, offering follow up material and direct quotes from me. I did additional weekend briefings on the phone with a ring round every Saturday morning. The press developed confidence in the accuracy and news content of what we were doing, particularly wanting stories about Ministerial mistakes and bad conduct. There was plenty of material. When we shadowed John Prescott's super Ministry we had all of transport, the Environment, the regions, local government and housing to comment on which made for an exciting agenda.

The leadership candidates for the Conservatives need to set out this week as Parliament returns what is wrong with this new government's approach and how they would take control of our borders, avoid tax rises, raise productivity and quality in public services, lift the growth rate, restore law and order and uphold freedom of speech.