

The role of a Shadow Cabinet Member

We were asked to provide a brief outline of the roles and responsibilities of the Shadow Cabinet for the benefit of new members.

Alongside the Leader, the Shadow Cabinet are the public face and public voice of the Labour Party – in the House, on the Today programme, on Question Time, etc.

What they say (and everything they say) will be taken to be Labour Party policy and will be recorded, scrutinised and 'costed' for an election-time 'tax bombshell'.

They lead on their subject areas at (parliamentary) Question Time, on statements, on Bills and orders and in debates. They are expected not only to master the detail and implications of Government proposals but to be able to convey their importance or implications in simple terms.

While dealing effectively with the day-to-day work of this parliament, and speaking for the Party in the wider public arena, they must also prepare for the policy problems, and hopefully the solutions, of the next.

So they help shape policy, especially in their own subject areas, working with the Joint Policy Committee, the National Policy Forum and the Commissions that report to it.

They need to network with colleagues in the House, especially backbench committees; across the wider Labour movement; and with experts in the field – including those that may not be of our political persuasion but whose insights may be both relevant and valuable (even if only in knowing what to avoid).

Being in the Shadow Cabinet is, bluntly, harder work than being in the Cabinet. There is no civil service briefing on which to rely – in fact it is part of the job of the shadow ministerial teams and their (small) staff to provide briefing for the rest of the PLP.

They are also expected not just to lead but to support and develop the talents of their frontbench and backbench teams.

And, of course, we expect them to be better than those they shadow! But it can be done. In fact it must!