

Chapter one: the background and roles of Shadow Cabinet

As with most other components of the Australian political system, Shadow Cabinet evolved from an informal process in the British Parliament. From the mid-nineteenth century in Britain, a distinct and organised opposition began to emerge; a leadership group to coordinate its strategy soon followed.¹ In the latter half of that century, the Shadow Cabinet became a recognised entity within British politics, though British academic D.R. Turner notes that ‘its use was still limited and its full potential unrecognised’.² Over time, the Shadow Cabinet slowly solidified its position in the British system, marked most notably in 1937, when the position of Leader of the Opposition began to carry a salary.³ This same development, however, had already taken place in Australia, 17 years earlier, following an initiative of Prime Minister Billy Hughes.⁴ As academic, Ian Ward notes, this remains the only formal recognition of Shadow Cabinet in Australia; shadow ministers’ salaries are set at the same rate as backbenchers, but they are usually given an allowance—around one-fifth of that allocated to ministers—for researchers and other staff.⁵

In this chapter, I briefly examine the evolution of the British Shadow Cabinet and how that has impacted the Australian equivalent. I then examine the three roles most commonly ascribed to the British Shadow Cabinet and discuss the extent to which they are evident in the modern Australian Shadow Cabinet. These roles are: organising the Opposition, providing an alternative government and serving as a training ground for future ministers.

1.1 The British system: the origins of Shadow Cabinet

In 1969, Turner published *The Shadow Cabinet in British Politics*, which he believed to be the first serious study of the development of the institution in that country.⁶ Four years later, British academic R.M. Punnett published *Frontbench Opposition: The Role of the Leader of the Opposition, the Shadow Cabinet and Shadow Government in British Politics*, and it is from this latter work that most of the argument in this section is drawn. Both Turner and Punnett make the same two points about the development of the Shadow Cabinet. First, that originally it was an informal gathering of senior opposition members which met to discuss

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1. DR Turner, *The Shadow Cabinet in British politics*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1969, p. xiv.
 2. *ibid.*, p. 18.
 3. RM Punnett, *Frontbench opposition: the role of the Leader of the Opposition, the Shadow Cabinet and Shadow government in British politics*, Heinemann, London, 1973, p. 77.
 4. G Maddox, *Australian democracy in theory and practice*, fifth edn, Pearson, Melbourne, 2005, p. 237.
 5. I Ward and R Stewart, *Politics one*, third edn, Palgrave, Melbourne, 2006, p. 235.
 6. Turner, *op cit.*, p. xiii.

government's actions and possible responses to these.⁷ Second, the most important step in the formalisation of Shadow Cabinet was the recognition that a vital role of an opposition was to present clearly a viable alternative to government. This included indicating who would hold ministerial positions after a change of government.⁸ Punnett commented on the British Shadow Cabinet that, in many ways its was 'more akin to the way the Cabinet operated in the nineteenth century than to the way it functions today [in 1973]'.⁹ At that time, unlike Cabinet, Shadow Cabinet had no sub-committees, an informal secretariat, few formal submissions and a much more informal atmosphere overall.¹⁰ Punnett described the tone of Shadow Cabinet meetings as 'more conversational' than Cabinet, even though these meetings were regular (for both parties, 5pm Tuesdays during sitting weeks) and were minuted.¹¹ Punnett noted also that it was common for British shadow ministers to hold secondary, part-time employment outside of parliament. This was because they only received a backbencher salary and their Shadow Cabinet duties essentially found them busy only during parliamentary sitting periods.¹²

1.2 The development of Shadow Cabinet in Australia

Despite the early financial recognition of the Leader of the Opposition in Australia, the development of Australia's system of Shadow Cabinet is not well documented. The primary problem with tracing its history is the paucity of material available. Furthermore, there also remains a lack of clarity, even among available sources. For instance, historian L.F. Crisp states that in May 1965, the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party resolved to increase the Opposition Executive from 14 to 25, creating a broader Shadow Ministry, with the Leader of the Opposition allocating portfolios to each member.¹³ S. Scalmer, writing in the edited collection *True believers: the story of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party*, seems to agree with this account. He notes that in May 1965 Caucus established the Shadow Ministry, 'so as

7. Turner, op cit., p. 1; Punnett, op cit., p. 36ff.

8. Turner, op. cit, p. xiv; Punnett, op. cit, p. 71.

9. Punnett, op. cit, p. 248.

10. *ibid.*, p. 258.

11. *ibid.*, pp. 222–25.

12. Punnett, pp. 380–81.

13. LF Crisp, *Australian national government*, fifth edn, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1983, p. 302. Note, however, that a system similar to the modern federal Shadow Cabinet arrangements had existed in the New South Wales parliament for three decades by this time: 'a 'shadow cabinet', that is, opposition leaders identified as spokesmen of their party in relation to the subject-matter of specified portfolios – a practice initiated by the Labor Opposition in the 1930s' (from RS Parker, *The government of New South Wales*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1978, p. 230). That such a system had functioned for so long at the state level makes the federal Labor Party's division over the matter and the history of the development of Australia's Shadow Cabinet system, even less clear.

to mirror the structure of government and heighten preparations for executive power'.¹⁴ Yet, in the same volume, political commentator Paul Kelly attributes this change to Gough Whitlam (ALP, Werriwa, 1952–1978) upon his election as Labor leader two years later:

The first decision Whitlam made as leader was designed to bring the Caucus into line with the demands of ministerial power. He apportioned shadow portfolios to the Labor frontbench as elected by the Caucus. This had two consequences – it increased the leader's authority, since he had shadow portfolios to bestow, and it promoted Party discipline since it meant that each portfolio had only one shadow minister and not a dozen. The system has prevailed ever since.¹⁵

Contemporary sources bear out Scalmer's account. A newspaper article from May 1965 discusses the changes—and the controversy within the Labor Party that they entailed:

The Federal Parliamentary Labour [sic] Party, after a bitter debate today, voted 38–26 in favour of the appointment of a full 'shadow Ministry' of 25 members. Opponents of the scheme criticised it as one of the most dangerous things which has happened in the Federal Parliamentary Labour Party in many years. They claimed that it would result in undue pressure on the party leader, Mr A. A. Calwell, to appoint unsuitable men to 'shadow' portfolios and that this would harm the party in the public mind.¹⁶

Within the Liberal Party, similar concerns were held. While the Coalition held government for most of the time in which the Australian model of Shadow Cabinet was developed, party founder and long-term leader Robert Menzies (Lib, Kooyong, 1934–1966) strongly opposed the system. It is worth quoting his rationale, expressed in his 1970 memoir *The Measure of the Years*, at length:

I have noticed with interest that both in London and in Canberra the practice has arisen for an Opposition to have a 'Shadow Cabinet'. This has no appeal for me. True, I can see that there is some advantage in having some member of the Opposition who acquires special knowledge of some individual ministry or department. But there are two disadvantages. The first is that when the Opposition comes home at a General Election, the Leader, the new Prime Minister, will suffer a painful embarrassment if Shadow Minister for X is left in the shadows, and another member preferred. The greater the victory and therefore the greater the numbers to choose from—quite a few having had earlier ministerial experience—the more likely the embarrassment. An Opposition Leader who wins needs a free hand when accepts a commission as Prime Minister. He should not be handicapped by too many personal promises made when in Opposition.

The second disadvantage is, in my opinion, even more significant. One of the advantages of Opposition is the chance it gives to many members to become all-rounders, well informed on a wide range of topics, competent as flexible debaters, and able to make useful contributions to the formulation of general policy.¹⁷

14. S Scalmer, 'Crisis to crisis: 1950–66', in J Faulkner and S Macintyre, eds, *True believers: the story of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2001, p. 102.

15. P Kelly, 'Caucus under Whitlam: 1967–75', in Faulkner and Macintyre, *ibid.*, p. 107.

16. 'Shadow Ministry vote stirs Caucus anger', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 May 1965, p. 4.

17. RG Menzies, *The measure of the years*, Cassell, Melbourne, 1970, pp. 17–18.

Menzies' objections counter the two major benefits of a Shadow Cabinet as argued by the system's Labor proponents. Supporters of the Shadow Cabinet considered it an asset for individual members of the Opposition to gain experience and public recognition within a particular portfolio area.

The May 1965 article discussed above also explains the existing system. Before 1965, the executive of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party in opposition consisted of 14 members: the four parliamentary leaders (the Leader, Deputy Leader, the Opposition Leader in the Senate and Deputy Leader in the Senate) plus ten members elected from Caucus. 'This Caucus executive, the 'shadow Cabinet', governs the parliamentary party and processes business.¹⁸ In addition, 17 policy committees existed to formulate policy across the various portfolios. By contrast, the new system of a 'Shadow Ministry' was proposed on the basis of two arguments. The first was that it would allow for greater specialisation and training for individual members in preparation for their roles as ministers after a change of government. The second was that it would more effectively counter the government: 'Every Minister in the Federal Government would feel the impact of the new Opposition specialisation on his portfolio, Mr Johnson [the motion's mover] claimed'.¹⁹ These two roles—of training future ministers and providing an identifiable alternative government—became two of the most significant functions of the Shadow Cabinet.

Mostly, however, the history of Australia's Shadow Cabinet remains unwritten. It is not within the scope of this project to provide an exhaustive chronology of the Shadow Cabinet's development in Australia, but it is important to note the extent to which this topic remains under-researched.

1.3 The roles of Shadow Cabinet

Three primary roles for the Shadow Cabinet can be seen through its development since the mid-nineteenth century. The first is to organise the parliamentary tactics of the Opposition; the second is to facilitate the Opposition's position as the alternative government; and the final role is to provide experience and training for potential future ministers. These three roles can all be seen as reasons for the evolution of Shadow Cabinet from its informal beginnings in Britain to the modern Australian version. In this section, I will examine how each of these roles came to be and what they contribute to our understanding of the functions of the federal Shadow Cabinet in Australia.

Organising the Opposition

The first, and most basic role filled by the Shadow Cabinet is one of organisation. Punnett highlights this component:

18. 'Shadow Ministry vote stirs Caucus anger', op. cit.

19. *ibid.*

The modern [British] Shadow Cabinet can be defined as a group of leading figures of the Opposition ... who meet together as a committee on a regular basis to assist the Leader of the Opposition in the task of managing the business of Opposition.²⁰

It is noteworthy that Punnett argues for the primacy of ‘managing the business of Opposition’, rather than formulating policy alternatives or other tasks of opposition, such as keeping a parliamentary check on the Government. This is echoed later in his book, when he discusses the meetings of Shadow Cabinet. He notes that while long-term strategies and policy directions were discussed and debated in Shadow Cabinet, the majority of time (between two-thirds and three-quarters) was spent on organisational matters, such as who would speak in response to introduced Bills, and questions for Question Time.²¹ He argues therefore:

To this extent, then, the title ‘Shadow Cabinet’ is a misleading one, implying too close a parallel to the real Cabinet. Labour’s term ‘Parliamentary Committee’ is much more appropriate, as it describes accurately what the Shadow Cabinet really is—a committee to organise the day-to-day *Parliamentary* affairs of the party in opposition.²²

This definition of Shadow Cabinet’s functions describes a fundamentally mechanical body, utilised primarily for housekeeping matters. It is a definition which is at odds with the notion of the members of Shadow Cabinet acting as the leaders of the alternative government. Such a description is less applicable to the Australian version of the Shadow Cabinet. The proliferation of other groups within the Opposition has reduced the Shadow Cabinet’s role as an organising committee of the Opposition’s parliamentary business.

The alternative government

The primary reason for the development of the Shadow Cabinet, as discussed above, is relatively straightforward. By virtue of holding office, governments have a natural advantage. Not only do they have the capacity to effect change and enact their policies (within the realms of constitutionality and other limiting factors), but they also hold the secondary benefits of power. Chief amongst these include: access to the public service for advice, research and analysis; a higher place in the public’s consciousness and a superior agenda-setting capacity, as a result of its greater access to the news media. These tools allow the Government to make a considerable advantage of its incumbency.

In contrast, and in addition to its other limitations, an opposition is frequently under-resourced. It is therefore less able to present itself on terms of equality with government. One way of making up this unfavourable contrast is for an opposition to organise itself in ways that bear comparison with government. Most notably, to present itself as an alternative government; it can do this by modelling its structure on that of the Government by allocating portfolios to frontbench members. There are two components of acting as an alternative

20. Punnet, op. cit., p. 35.

21. ibid., p. 220.

22. ibid., p. 221.

government: arguing the case against the incumbent party and providing an alternative policy vision.

As Turner indicates, the primary task of the earliest incarnations of Shadow Cabinet were mostly mechanical, in terms of organising the Opposition's positions on issues and deciding matters of parliamentary strategy.²³ However, as the concept of Shadow Cabinet evolved, the idea of appearing as an alternative government became the most important task for oppositions. At this point it is worth noting the difference inherent in the conceptual distinction between an opposition and an alternative government. An opposition is principally concerned with countering the government's policies and ideas. This can take place in a variety of ways, ranging from political terrorism to the constitutional form of parliamentary opposition. The latter form is the type of opposition usually meant by the term in Westminster-style democracies. However, even in the second instance the term 'opposition' essentially only describes a reactive body; one which disagrees with the Government.

The term 'alternative government', conversely, implies something quite different—namely, a group whose purpose will include putting forward a policy set to provide choice to voters (often, of course, this goes hand in hand with the broader notion of opposition). Within a stable democracy like Australia, there will only ever be one group which can be described as the 'alternative government', regardless of the number of groups who position themselves in opposition to the government. Minor parties in Australia do not serve the role of, nor would they see themselves as, or be perceived as alternative governments, since they do not reasonably expect to win the requisite number of seats to form a government. Thus, their role is different to that of the major party in opposition.

The development of the Shadow Cabinet has much to do with the recognition that opposition members needed to present themselves as an alternative government. Most immediately, by mirroring the structure of the government by having shadow ministers for the various portfolio areas, oppositions are able to demonstrate how Government would appear should it change hands. Punnett succinctly notes the dual role of an opposition, which must:

... lead the attack on what the Government is currently doing, but it also has to appear as the alternative Government, demonstrating that it is sufficiently responsible to do a better job than the current Ministry. In short, it has to 'conduct a war' against the Government while at the same time considering the problems that it will itself face in the task of 'post-war reconstruction'.²⁴

This rationale can be seen clearly in the arguments made by the proponents of Labor's Shadow Ministry changes in 1965, as discussed above. The primacy of placing one-on-one pressure on ministers, whilst also focusing on its own plans, should it win government, was a key argument.

23. Turner, op. cit., p. 1.

24. Punnett, op. cit., p. 214.

A related reason for the development and formalisation of the Shadow Cabinet has been the increasing complexity of government work since the mid-twentieth century.²⁵ This necessitated a greater specialisation amongst opposition members. It became implausible for all members to comment knowledgeably on all issues, particularly given that they were unable to access the public service to provide advice and research. To avoid confusion, contradiction and ill-informed answers to media questions, oppositions began appointing an official spokesperson for each portfolio area. By so doing, they were able to ensure that the media could identify which opposition member to contact for comments on government announcements and for details of the alternative government's policies. In this way, the link between Shadow Cabinet and the Opposition as the alternative government was apparent—the approach of having one person from opposition identifiable as responsible for a particular issue mirrors that of the Cabinet's role in government.

The centrality of an identifiable Shadow Cabinet in the Opposition's presentation of itself as an alternative government has been illustrated by recent federal elections. In addition to the leaders' debates, these campaigns have featured debates between ministers and shadow ministers in various high-profile portfolios, such as health, industrial relations and finance. This development signals the importance of these clear-cut shadowing positions. Despite the argument that there has been, and continues to be a rise in 'presidential' politics in the Australian system, a more accurate way of characterising the contest between the major parties is that it is a competition between two teams.²⁶ After being elected Labor leader in December 2006, Kevin Rudd issued a press statement outlining his 'team', arguing that it 'would give the people a clear choice at the next election'.²⁷ Similarly, after his election as Opposition Leader in September 2008, Malcolm Turnbull referred to his new Shadow Ministry as a 'team [which] will provide the leadership demanded by the great challenges facing our nation'.²⁸ Media responses to these two statements can be seen in the following media excerpts: the first following Rudd's Shadow Ministry announcement, the second Turnbull's:

25. Punnett, op. cit., p. 71.

26. D Jaensch and P Weller, *Responsible government in Australia*, Drummond, Melbourne, 1980; R Lucy, *The Australian form of government: models in dispute*, MacMillan, Melbourne, 1993.

27. K Rudd, *Kevin Rudd's new Shadow Ministry*, media release, Parliament House, 11 December 2006.

28. M Turnbull, *Appointment of Shadow Ministry*, media release, Parliament House, 22 September 2008.

Facing off

CABINET MINISTERS

John Howard

MR Howard is the foremost politician of his generation yet, once again, is under threat from Labor's generational change.

The ministerial reshuffle is an attempt to freshen the Government's agenda after almost 11 years in office.

Mr Howard will not be complacent in an election year, particularly with a Labor resurgence.



LEADER

SHADOW MINISTERS

Kevin Rudd

MR Rudd has revived Labor's fortunes and restored its chances of winning the election expected to be held in the second half of this year. However, his challenge is to continue Labor's improved fortunes once his leadership honeymoon inevitably ends.

Mr Rudd is disciplined and tough. He must, however, ensure his team follows this example.



Malcolm Turnbull

THE rising star of the Liberal Party who will increasingly be mentioned as a future prime minister.

Mr Turnbull's promotion to the Cabinet after less than

ENVIRONMENT AND WATER RESOURCES

three years in Parliament earmarks him as a future leader.

His election-year task of overhauling Australia's water supply system and the River Murray will test his mettle.



Peter Garrett

THE former Midnight Oil frontman oozes credibility on the environment after years as a campaigner.

His passionate song lyrics and stint as Australian Con-

servation Foundation chairman add to his CV.

But Mr Garrett's public standing might be undermined when Labor loosens its uranium policy in April.



Ref: 26061873

Joe Hockey

KNOCKABOUT bloke who has built strong media profile through appearances with Labor leader Kevin Rudd on the popular *Sunrise* breakfast TV show. Mr Howard



EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

clearly is trying to capitalise on his public appeal to defuse the lingering public resentment at unpopular industrial relations reforms. Pitched as the friendly face of IR.

- ONE half of Labor's leadership double act. Determined and consistent politician who has risen rapidly despite close links with failed former leader Mark Latham. Her at-

Julia Gillard

tacking skills probably forced the removal of Kevin Andrews and replacement with Mr Hockey in this portfolio. Strong policy skills despite Medicare Gold's failure.



Kevin Andrews

CONSISTENT performer who gets the job done without stirring great levels of excitement. Introduced contentious industrial relations reforms amid strong oppo-



IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP

sition, from the union movement in particular. Has been able to counter claims of workplace disaster with historically low unemployment rates. Safe pair of hands.

- RISING Labor star who has now scored Amanda Vanstone's political scalp. Has made a big impact since entering Parliament at the 2004 election. Skilled and en-

Tony Burke

thusiastic media performer who benefited from a series of scandals in immigration, headlined by Cornelia Rau's detention. Former NSW Upper House member.



Tony Abbott

ONCE viewed as a strong leadership contender, his fusion of religious beliefs and policy issues have weakened his public and party standing. But Mr Abbott remains



a devastatingly effective communicator with surprising personal appeal. He neutralised health as an issue at the 2004 election with some clever politics.

HEALTH

- HANDED one of the biggest challenges by Mr Rudd – health is a key portfolio for Labor and a tough job. She is opposing Mr Abbott, who is one of the

Nicola Roxon

Government's hitmen, but has plenty of experience despite her relative youth. Will have to deal with legacy of Medicare Gold, which failed despite some merit.



Ref: 2008-04873

Peter Costello

LEADERSHIP prospects are dimming, yet remains critical part of Government team. Economic management is a key plank of the Government's 11 years in



TREASURY

RETAINED by Mr Rudd in top economic portfolio despite strong backing for former leader Kim Beazley. Interest rate rises present opportunity to dent Govern-

Wayne Swan

ment's credibility. Will face difficult challenge to weaken his rival, particularly on the parliamentary floor. Vital policy area for Labor's election chances.



Mark Vaile

NATIONALS leader switched from Trade in September last year to concentrate more on the home front.

TRANSPORT

FORMER ACTU president is one of Labor's most experienced frontbenchers, having been in shadow cabinet since 1996.



Martin Ferguson



Brendan Nelson

POTENTIAL leadership successor who has recognised importance of strong links with defence industry.

DEFENCE

FAILED former leader Mark Latham's closest associate is a risk in this key portfolio. Has been rewarded for backing Mr Rudd.



Joel Fitzgibbon



Phillip Ruddock

GOVERNMENT stalwart who has performed commendably, without excitement, as Attorney-General.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

FORMER public servant and political staffer whose relatively dour personality and safe pair of hands is suited to the portfolio.



Kelvin Thomson



Alexander Downer

A PILLAR of the Government who has built credibility in foreign affairs and is still a long shot as a future leader.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

THE former lawyer and defence shadow now faces the tough job of replacing his leader, Kevin Rudd, in foreign affairs.

Robert McClelland



Source: 'Facing off', *Advertiser*, 24 January 2007, p. 21.

PARTY FACE-OFF

How the frontbenchers match up



LABOR Kevin Rudd, 51 – Prime Minister

STRENGTHS

- Experienced
- Strong grasp of fine detail
- Experienced in diplomacy and commonwealth-state relations
- Has a clearly laid-out

platform of promises
■ Secure in his leadership

WEAKNESSES

- Prone to waffle
- Reputed control freak
- Lacking in charisma



LIBERAL Malcolm Turnbull, 54 – Opposition Leader

STRENGTHS

- Confident
- Strong commercial background
- Good grasp of economics
- Carries a little Howard-era baggage

WEAKNESSES

- Seen as arrogant
- Relatively inexperienced in politics
- Can struggle with political tactics

Julia Gillard, 47 – Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Social Inclusion



STRENGTHS

- Labor's best parliamentary performer
- Hard worker with a firm grasp of the big reform program

WEAKNESSES

- Sometimes impulsive

Christopher Pyne, 41 – Education spokesman



STRENGTHS

- Confident style
- Experience in government

WEAKNESSES

- Could be challenged by first major portfolio

Michael Keenan, 36 – Employment and workplace relations spokesman



STRENGTHS

- No Howard government baggage

WEAKNESSES

- Has little experience and could struggle at this level



Wayne Swan, 54 – Treasurer

STRENGTHS

- Experienced
- Good political mind
- Is improving his parliamentary performance

WEAKNESSES

- Short on charisma



Julie Bishop, 52 – Treasury spokesman

STRENGTHS

- Is confident
- Has cabinet experience

WEAKNESSES

- Carries Howard-era baggage



Lindsay Tanner, 52 – Finance and Deregulation

STRENGTHS

- Strong on policy
- Very good parliamentary performer



Joe Hockey, 43 – Finance, competition policy and deregulation spokesman

STRENGTHS

- Popular and affable
- Has ministerial experience

WEAKNESSES

- Carries Howard-era baggage



Anthony Albanese, 45 – Infrastructure

STRENGTHS

- Funny, strong parliamentary performer who is very political

WEAKNESSES

- Left-wing factional heavyweight who politicises everything



Andrew Robb, 57 – Infrastructure, COAG and emissions trading scheme spokesman

STRENGTHS

- Smart Liberal Party strategist credited with Liberals 1996 win as campaign director

WEAKNESSES

- Strong business community links
- Not articulate, lacks charisma

LABOR

Nicola Roxon, 41 – Health

STRENGTHS

- Steady parliamentary performer

WEAKNESSES

- Jury is still out on ministerial ability

Joel Fitzgibbon, 46 – Defence

STRENGTHS

- Level-headed and calm

WEAKNESSES

- Lacks killer instinct

Peter Garrett, 55 – Environment

STRENGTHS

- Committed to the environment

WEAKNESSES

- Inexperience, particularly within the Labor Party

LIBERAL

Peter Dutton, 37 – Health spokesman

STRENGTHS

- Confident and experienced

WEAKNESSES

- Sometimes loses his head in enthusiasm to attack opponents

David Johnston, 52 – Defence spokesman

STRENGTHS

- Showed a good grasp of national securities issues as customs minister

WEAKNESSES

- Little known and lacks experience at top level

Greg Hunt, 42 – Environment spokesman

STRENGTHS

- Limited Howard-era baggage
- Confident parliamentary performer

WEAKNESSES

- Tends toward overconfidence

LABOR

Stephen Smith, 52 – Foreign Affairs

STRENGTHS

- Cautious and diplomatic
- Hard-working

WEAKNESSES

- Nervous parliamentary performer
- Often attacked as a colourless Labor machine man

Jenny Macklin, 54 – Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

STRENGTHS

- Is consultative and inclusive with indigenous groups, carers and pensioners
- Has a sharp policy mind with a long history in social policy

WEAKNESSES

- Too cautious and slow to act

LIBERAL

Helen Coonan, 58 – Foreign affairs spokeswoman

STRENGTHS

- Experienced
- Diplomatic

WEAKNESSES

- Inexperienced in this portfolio

Tony Abbott, 50 – Family and community services and indigenous affairs spokesman

STRENGTHS

- Sharp, strong parliamentary performer, smart and quick on his feet

WEAKNESSES

- Ill-disciplined, impatient and is considered to be uncompassionate

Source: 'Party face-off', *Australian*, 23 September 2008, p. 4.

These remarkably similar articles resemble comparisons of two teams in a big match. Even the titles—'Facing off' and 'Party face-off'—contain more than a suggestion of a series of direct one-on-one competitions.

The 2007 federal election campaign highlighted this function of Shadow Cabinet, in that much of the Coalition's advertising focused on the Labor frontbench. Most explicitly the criticism was that Labor lacked experience and that its membership was heavily union-based and unrepresentative of the electorate at large.²⁹ That the Government was prepared to debate Labor, but not minor party spokespeople demonstrates the difference between being an opposition and being an alternative government. Indeed, by simultaneously engaging shadow ministers in debates and building an advertising campaign around the frontbench's unsuitability to form government, it can be argued that the Coalition Government served to legitimise their opponents as a serious alternative. Commenting on the Coalition's use of this comparison as an electoral tactic, journalist Laurie Oakes notes that:

Almost all governments—particularly when they have been in office for a while—mount this case at election time, and the reason is obvious. Ministers make headlines throughout the electoral cycle and achieve high name recognition. Opposition frontbenchers find it much harder to gain attention, and the public gets little opportunity to evaluate them. Therefore, ministries almost always look stronger than shadow ministries. Every opposition, Coalition or Labor, faces the same hurdle.³⁰

Another example of the focus on Shadow Cabinet and the way this makes election campaigns a contest between a government and an alternative government, was Kevin Rudd's public statements regarding the central economic portfolios of a Rudd Labor government during the campaign.³¹ By specifying that, should Labor win the election, Julia Gillard would be Deputy Leader and Minister for Industrial Relations, Wayne Swan would be Treasurer and Lindsay Tanner Minister for Finance, Rudd signalled the importance of presenting a clear, cohesive 'team' as the alternative government. This also had the effect of providing a comparison with the Coalition's 'team' of Prime Minister John Howard and Treasurer Peter Costello, a strategy designed to counter perceptions of discord between the two senior Liberals. Thus, an overt message of the 2007 federal election was the contest between two teams, the government and the alternative government, centred on the Cabinet and its shadow. In this way, the 2007 election offered as one of its most prominent themes a demonstration of the role for which Shadow Cabinets were developed—namely, giving the Opposition a clear and identifiable way to present itself as the alternative to the government.

Most shadow ministers spoken to in the course of this project considered keeping a check on, and providing an alternative to the Government were the primary reasons for the existence of Shadow Cabinet. One shadow minister described the Shadow Ministry as having a two-

29. See, for instance, John Howard's campaign launch speech: 'If we elect the wrong people, if we put the Government of this country in the hands of a Ministry 70 per cent of whose members will be former trade union officials ...', in which the importance of the membership of the alternative government's Shadow Cabinet is clearly highlighted by the prime minister. The Coalition's media supporters also emphasised this point, with articles such as P Ackerman's 'Rudd will dance to union tune should he win office', *Sunday Mail* (Adelaide), 3 June 2007, p. 82.

30. L Oakes, 'The A(LP) Team', *The Bulletin*, 2 October 2007, p. 14.

31. G McManus, 'Key trio to stay as Rudd backtracks', *Herald-Sun*, 28 September 2007, p. 12.

pronged role. This was first, to develop the Opposition's policies and respond to those of the Government; and second, to hold the Government to account, through critique of its legislation and via debate and questioning in the parliament.

A training ground for Cabinet?

One of the most interesting points Punnett makes in his examination of British frontbench opposition is that the skills which make a good shadow minister are not necessarily the same as those which make a good minister in government.³² The difference, he argues, is between strong debaters (as shadow ministers need to must be) and strong administrators (as ministers need to be).³³ This is an important distinction, in that by defining the central requirements of the two positions, Punnett illustrates the differences between them.

Shadow ministers, in their dual role as both critics of the Government and potential future government ministers, have the public as their primary constituency. In parliamentary, public and media appearances, shadow ministers have one main goal: to persuade the electorate that the Government is not performing well and that the Opposition could do better. While ministers also have the goal of convincing the electorate of their own merits and the Opposition's shortcomings, many of their main interactions are internal. Ministers are focused on working within their department to formulate ideas and within Cabinet to get those ideas adopted as party policy (or vice versa). As Punnett argues, people with debating skills do not necessarily also have administrative ability. This means that opposition leaders or the parliamentary party—depending on the method by which shadow ministers are appointed—need to decide which to prioritise. Should shadow ministers be chosen on the basis of their capacity as a shadow minister, or their potential as a future minister?³⁴ Despite the different focus involved in being a shadow or a minister however, most of the current and former shadow ministers interviewed for this project believed that their experience in the Shadow Ministry had been helpful in preparing them for executive leadership.

The practical differences between Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet are illustrated by the experience of parliamentarians who make the transition from Shadow Cabinet to Cabinet, for instance, those who made the change after Labor's election in 1983.³⁵ Former Senator John Button (ALP, Victoria, 1974–1993) described how the incoming ministers suddenly had

32. Punnett, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

33. *ibid.*, p. 150.

34. It needs acknowledging that factors other than past or potential ability as a shadow minister or minister also go towards determining the Shadow Cabinet's composition. These include party factions, geographic and gender distributions and internal party political matters such as, dealing with supporters or potential rivals.

35. The election of 1983 remains at this point the most recent change of government about which much is known. Several key members of the Labor frontbench of the time have published memoirs, including the leader, Bob Hawke and those quoted in this section, in addition to the other works focusing on that period. Equivalent material from the Coalition's frontbench of 1996 has yet to appear.

vastly-increased workloads and responsibilities, for which Shadow Cabinet membership had not prepared them.³⁶ Fellow new Minister Senator Susan Ryan (ALP, Australian Capital Territory, 1975–1988) also discussed the nature of the transition. Ryan placed particular emphasis on the ways in which her experience in Shadow Cabinet had not proved to be an adequate grounding for holding executive power:

In the swift and glorious transition from Opposition to Government, I had been flooded with optimism. Shadow ministry is, however, only a partial preparation for the reality of wielding power. Initial Cabinet experiences are daunting; the sense of power is weighed down by responsibility.³⁷

Button also pointed out that new ministers had to learn to deal with counterparts overseas, the media and the public service:

Oppositions have little to do with the public service. Ministers consult with public servants, and engage with them on a day-to-day basis. And then there are the media. Except at election times, the media are not much interested in opposition spokesmen [sic].³⁸

Former Opposition leader Bill Hayden (ALP, Oxley, 1961–1988) made a similar point about the different levels of importance attached to the Cabinet and its Shadow:

Opposition has no executive power. When it speaks on policy it is discussing the equivalent of a wish list ... What Government says and does is sought-after news. To gain attention, Opposition has to create news angles; yet the artifices and gimmicks needed to be fashioned to attract media attention to a policy, given the imperatives of television coverage, can be risky. The dividing line is fine.³⁹

Focused on parliamentary performance and primarily working within the system of their own party, shadow ministers gain little experience in the key elements of ministerial activity, particularly in administration. Punnett argues from a British perspective that membership of parliamentary committees gives shadow ministers a better idea of the workings of government and the responsibilities of ministers, than holding a shadow portfolio.⁴⁰ He also argues that Shadow Cabinet is more likely than Cabinet to see alliances form between like-minded members, since competition for money and policy priority is less marked.⁴¹ Susan Ryan describes the different atmosphere present in Cabinet, which supports Punnett's claim:

Cabinet is competitive; all of us were quite touchy when our early submissions were shot down in flames. Survival skills, aided and abetted by the cream of the public service, develop fast. Arguments for submissions become stronger, costings more precise, data more

36. J Button, *As it happened*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1998, p. 199.

37. S Ryan, *Catching the waves: life in and out of politics*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 1999, p. 226.

38. Button, op. cit., p. 200.

39. B Hayden, *Hayden: an autobiography*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1996, p. 313.

40. *ibid.*, p. 381.

41. *ibid.*, pp. 225–27.

telling, political implications more clearly signalled. Ministers become hardened to having their submissions 'knocked off.'⁴²

Cabinet differs from Shadow Cabinet in terms of skills required, access to power, accountability, workload, media attention and relationships with public servants, counterparts from other jurisdictions and colleagues. The range of areas of expertise, skills and experience central to Cabinet, but unnecessary for the Shadow Cabinet, suggests that membership of the latter may be poor preparation for a career in the former.

However, this view is not one shared by the subjects I interviewed who have experience in both Shadow Cabinet and Cabinet. Parliamentarians from both major parties believe that membership of either Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet increased one's ability to work in the other. The primary way in which Cabinet ministers found their Shadow experience to be useful relates to the similarity of processes. As will be discussed in the next chapter, many of the Shadow Cabinet's procedures are based on those of Cabinet itself—most particularly in the way meetings are run, and the system of reviewing and responding to government legislation.

In effect Shadow Cabinets tend to operate as scaled-down versions of Cabinet. One current Minister, with considerable experience in the Shadow Ministry during Labor's term in opposition, noted that the main changes noticed upon moving into government were those of degree and quality: Cabinet meetings are more formal than Shadow Cabinet meetings. They involve more people and they discuss papers of significantly more detail which are given more scrutiny than those of the Shadow Cabinet. As an illustration of this difference, the minister noted that a typical Shadow Cabinet meeting lasts between two to three hours, depending on the issues, while a Cabinet meeting would be between three and three and a half hours during parliamentary sitting periods and could frequently last all day during parliamentary recesses. A Liberal shadow minister made similar comments, citing the involvement of the public service departments in Cabinet processes as a driving factor in these differences. Bureaucratic involvement means more time is spent on preparing Cabinet papers and these are contributed to by numerous departments and ministers, in a far longer process, with more rigorous analysis than occurs in a Shadow Cabinet equivalent. So while experience as a shadow minister may not prepare one for the scale and depth of activity which accompanies Cabinet membership, it does provide people with familiarity with some of the forms and processes used in government.

One current Minister considers his time spent in opposition to have been invaluable. Like several others interviewed for this project, this minister felt that the high-pressured, poorly-resourced position of the shadow minister was an excellent training ground for the ministry itself. He described the shadow ministerial environment as being 'sink or swim'. The question of shadow ministerial resources will be discussed in later sections of this monograph, but it is important to note that other parliamentarians with shadow ministerial experience concurred with the view that the shortage of Shadow Cabinet resources had its

42. Ryan, op. cit., p. 226.

advantages. One current minister identified the biggest challenge after Labor's election to government as having to manage a much larger office—a more subtle indication of resource discrepancy between resources available in opposition and government. Another Labor minister added that a further benefit of shadow ministerial experience was the opportunity to build up relationships with portfolio area stakeholders. In opposition, such relationships provided a base of advice and feedback and in government these could be used as a supplement to one's department. This minister further noted that experience in the Shadow Ministry gave a good insight into how to put together a policy, including the costing component. The minister felt that this experience provided excellent training for government.

As noted earlier, the Shadow Cabinet/Cabinet experience can work in both directions. A Coalition shadow minister commented that experience gained as a minister during the Howard Government gave the parliamentarian an understanding of what ministerial actions would and would not work. For shadow ministers in a new opposition, with more experience in executive government than their opponents, this perspective can prove useful in anticipating how a new government's policies will work. According to this shadow minister, this experience helps shadows to perceive flaws in legislation and in some cases, to work to improve Bills through amendments.

In these ways, it was argued by the shadow ministers interviewed for this project that this experience has served them well. Punnett may be correct in asserting that Shadow Cabinet service is of limited value in preparing for Cabinet membership, but at the same time it appears it has some benefits. While the skills required to be a successful minister or shadow minister are not exactly the same, there is considerable overlap. As well, there are several areas in which shadow ministerial experience can be of significant benefit to Cabinet ministers.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have laid the foundation for the discussions of Shadow Cabinet's procedures and functions which will follow. As has been evident in this chapter, the history of Australia's system of Shadow Cabinet has not been well documented. I have identified three functions considered to provide the traditional reasons for Shadow Cabinet's development, and have discussed how these work in the context of contemporary Australian Shadow Cabinets. The first, organising the parliamentary business of the Opposition, has largely been moved from the realm of the Shadow Cabinet to other bodies within an opposition. The second, providing an alternative government by proposing a different policy agenda and by using parliament to keep the Government accountable, remains the most notable role of the Shadow Cabinet. Finally, despite some limitations, Shadow Cabinet serves as a training ground for future ministers, preparing them for executive government by giving them experience in putting together policies and having these subject to review by colleagues and the media, as well as in allowing them the chance to develop relationships with stakeholders in the area. In the next chapter, I will focus on the procedures of Shadow Cabinet—how it operates, what it does, and the roles of individual shadow ministers.