MESSAGE FOR ALL MEMBERS OF THE PLP FROM MARGARET BECKETT ON BEHALF OF THE PLP STANDING ORDERS WORKING GROUP

July 29 2010

Dear Colleagues

Further to my most recent letter I am writing to set out some proposals and choices on how our Shadow Cabinet is chosen from the autumn.

The working group established by the PLP has now met on a number of occasions, we have taken evidence from many members of the PLP, and we have received a number of written submissions, for which many thanks.

As I set out last week there are a number of issues we will continue to consider into the autumn but it is clear that we need to agree as a matter of urgency the basis on which the Shadow Cabinet will be chosen. This will be completed before parliament returns in October, as agreed at last Monday’s PLP meeting. As set out in my last letter, this is because the Spending Review will follow very quickly, i.e. 20 October.

This means we need to resolve how we choose a Shadow Cabinet in the ‘mini-session’ in September.

The Working Group is suggesting that we proceed on the following basis:

On Tuesday September 7 at 12 noon the PLP will meet for a special meeting to consider all of the proposals set out below. Our recommendation is that the meeting should discuss these matters in as much detail as colleagues wish. However, to decide detailed and complicated procedural issues by a show of hands does not seem sensible so we are recommending that there then be a ballot of the PLP in the PLP Office on Wednesday September 8 from 10am – 5pm to decide the procedures for getting the Shadow Cabinet in place.

**PROPOSAL 1 – PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE**

**We would first ask that the PLP consider supporting the following recommendation, which we have reached unanimously: We believe the PLP Standing Orders should be re-drafted to recognise the Parliamentary Committee as a body that sits irrespective of whether we are in Government or Opposition, as a specific vehicle for the views of backbenchers to be put to the leadership on a regular and sustained basis.**

**Consequently, we believe further that the rules must also now include separate and specific references to the ‘Shadow Cabinet’, who would no longer be assumed to carry out that role.**

**PROPOSAL 2 – SHADOW CABINET**

**Beyond this, we have been struck by the wide array of opinions about the mechanism by which we choose a Shadow Cabinet, the number of colleagues on the Shadow Cabinet, the gender balance and the term of office.**

**Rather than make one proposal we believe these are things it is better for the PLP as a whole to decide by ballot.**

**We have reduced the choices for electing a Shadow Cabinet down to five key areas:**

**1. Size of Shadow Cabinet**

Under existing rules our Shadow Cabinet totals 26 members, whereas Cabinet contains 23. All the submissions we have received on the size of the Shadow Cabinet have indicated that this number should fall. It is however difficult to be precise about the exact size of the Shadow Cabinet as it will need to reflect, broadly, how the Government is constructed. This leads inevitably to some element of flexibility in the hands of the Leader and we believe our Standing Orders should reflect this.

**2. Composition of Shadow Cabinet**

We have received submissions which range from the Shadow Cabinet being wholly elected by the PLP to being wholly appointed by the Leader, as well as options that combine election and appointment. The options on the ballot paper reflect this range of opinion.

**3. Gender profile of Shadow Cabinet**

The options put to us regarding the gender balance of the Shadow Cabinet ranged from a 50-50 split to a number that reflects the current gender balance of the PLP (currently 31.5%).

**We believe that, should the PLP agree a gender balance below 50%, then the Standing Orders should be amended to say that this is a minimum that applies equally to men and women.**

**4. Frequency of elections**

The current Standing Orders require an annual election for the Shadow Cabinet. The point has been made to us that this may detract from the job of holding the Government to account if Shadow Cabinet members are concerned about having to stand for re-election. Again the choices on the ballot paper reflect the options that have been put to us.

**5. Election of Chief Whip**

The Chief Whip is currently appointed by the Leader from the elected section of the Shadow Cabinet. We could leave this as it is, but there is also a case for the Chief Whip to have their own explicit mandate from the PLP. Therefore one alternative put to us is that we hold a specific election to fill the post of Chief Whip.

**DRAFT BALLOT PAPER**

We have agreed a draft ballot paper, attached, which sets out the range of options before us. We believe the best way to agree this is through a ballot under AV on Wednesday 8 September. Once that ballot has been counted we will have a final set of agreed changes. We believe this should then be put to a straight YES/NO ballot on Tuesday 14 September. As ever with these ballots, colleagues would be able to vote via Proxy.

The ballot paper attached is of course a *draft* – if you believe we have missed something that would represent an important choice for the PLP please contact Martin O’Donovan, PLP Secretary, so we can consider amending the document. In any case, this proposed way forward will need to be agreed by the PLP on Tuesday September 7th at 12noon.

**OUTSTANDING ISSUES**

There are two issues that, at present, do not figure on the ballot paper, although we accept they could be added if colleagues feel we need an explicit mandate in any of these areas. These are:

* The mechanism by which we deliver the agreed proposal on gender balance. **As set out in point 3, above, we propose that the gender balance apply equally to men and women. In practical terms, we believe the rule should be that in Shadow Cabinet elections PLP members must cast a minimum number of votes both for men and for women otherwise it will not be a valid vote.**
* **We believe the Shadow Cabinet election should continue to be a first past the post election.** Some colleagues have expressed concerns about this but we believe the alternative is incredibly complex, time consuming and not necessarily fairer.

I attach below a timeline which will hopefully make sense of how the weeks between early September and mid-October will work.

Finally, we were asked to provide a brief outline of the roles and responsibilities of the Shadow cabinet for the benefit of new members, which is also attached.

We look forward to seeing you in September.

Best wishes

Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP

*Working Group on PLP Standing Orders: Margaret Beckett (Chair), Roberta Blackman Woods, Clive Efford, Jessica Morden, George Mudie, Jim Sheridan*

SUGGESTED TIMELINE

Monday 6 September 6pm ‘Normal’ PLP meeting, will discuss below procedure

Tuesday 7 September 12 noon Special PLP meeting to discuss the 5 key proposals

Weds 8 September 10-5 Ballot on the proposals

Tuesday 14 September 10-5 ‘Yes/No’ ballot on new procedures

Saturday 25 September pm New Leader elected

Sunday 26 September 11am Nominations open for Shadow Cabinet

Weds 29 September 5pm Nominations close

Thursday 30 September 9am-12 Ballot papers available in PLP Office at Conference. After this time they will be sent in the post.

Mon 4 Oct–Thurs 7 Oct 10am-5pm PLP Office open for MPs to vote in person.

Thursday 7 October 5pm Start counting votes in PLP Office

Thursday 7 October Approx 9pm Announce results of election

Monday 11 October Parliament returns

Weds 20 October Comprehensive Spending Review

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!

***DRAFT*** BALLOT PAPER

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE

Do you agree we should re-establish a Parliamentary Committee in Opposition, as in Government, to be the executive body of the Parliamentary Labour Party?

YES NO

SHADOW CABINET ELECTIONS

1. Composition of the Shadow Cabinet

*In terms of how MPs come to serve on the Shadow Cabinet, do you believe the Shadow Cabinet should be:*

A. Wholly appointed by the Party Leader

B. Wholly elected by Commons members of the PLP

C. 50% appointed by the Party Leader, 50% elected by Commons members of the PLP

D. Two thirds elected by Commons members of the PLP, one third appointed by the Leader.

2. Size of Shadow Cabinet  
*The Leader and Deputy Leader of the Party, the PLP Chair and the Leader and Chief Whip in the Lords, attend Shadow Cabinet ex-officio. How many additional members should there be?:*

A. 19 members (current allocation)

B. 16 members

C. 12 members

3. Gender profile of the Shadow Cabinet

*What proportion of the Shadow Cabinet places should be reserved for men or for women as a minimum?*

A. 50%

B. 40%

C. Broadly the same proportion as the PLP’s gender profile (currently 31.5%)

D. 30% initially, increasing to 50% by 2012.

4. Frequency of elections

*How often do you believe we should hold Shadow Cabinet elections?*

A. Every year

B. Every two years

C. Once a parliament

5. Post of Chief Whip

How should the Chief Whip be selected?

A. Appointed by the Leader from the Shadow Cabinet

B. Elected by Commons members of the PLP at the start of a parliament

*\* - Please note. If the PLP votes for Option A on Question 1 then the response to Questions 4* *shall be null and void.*

*\*\* - Please note. If the PLP votes for Option D on Question 3 there will, at least, be an election held in 2010 and 2012, irrespective of the answer to Question 4.*