

Battling for credibility from the opposition: the experiences of the Shadow Cabinet in the UK and Italy

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In the United Kingdom the political weight and experience of the shadow cabinet has proven of crucial importance for the opposition to present itself as a government-in-waiting capable of pressing criticism on the government and also of resetting the political agenda. Visibility and credibility are the two main issues for any opposition party: the shadow cabinet model shows that party leaders need to put faces to policies by shaping a leadership team capable of acting like a proper government.

The recent election of Ed Milliband's Shadow Cabinet marked the conclusion of the leadership contest within the Labour Party. A similar experiment was attempted in Italy in 2008 when Walter Veltroni, then Leader of the defeated Partito Democratico, in the aftermath of the general election announced the creation of a shadow cabinet (governo ombra). When Veltroni stepped down as party leader in February 2009 the shadow cabinet formula was definitely abandoned. Born after a crushing electoral defeat and under a controversial leadership, Veltroni's governo ombra was never respected as a credible alternative government and its members have been commonly referred to as "the shadows of a cabinet".

The shadow cabinet model is deeply rooted in the tradition of the Westminster parliamentary system but it also proves that opposition leaders can present themselves as credible alternative if they can "put names on policies" that is linking a specific set of proposals to an individual opposition frontbencher. A more precise analysis of the British system will help to outline potential

good practices that can be of value in other parliamentary systems.

1. In the UK the shadow Cabinet replaces the Party as the centre of political activity. In the "Westminster system" the political agenda of the Labour Party is set solely by the Parliamentary Labour Party (the parliamentary group) and there are no parallel political committee (eg. the Italian Segreteria politica) within the party structure, as it is the case for most European parties. Ed Milliband's team consists of 24 shadow Secretaries of State (Ministri) and over 70 Ministers (sottosegretari). Overall almost one third of the Labour parliamentary party.

2. The election of the Labour shadow cabinet came as the final readjustment after the election of a new party Leader. While Ed Milliband was elected jointly by the parliamentary party, trade unions and party members, the Shadow Cabinet is elected directly by the Parliamentary Labour Party every two years or after any leadership contest. In 2010 over 45 MPs submitted their name for election and the first



3. Shadow cabinet members are commonly expected to assume office after winning the election as a result senior cabinet ministers are chosen well before a general election is called. This system is tailored to the one party government system where cabinet positions are not negotiated within a parliamentary coalition. The current British coalition government is an unlikely exception since five important departments have been assigned to the Liberal Democrats. However, of the 27 conservative ministers virtually all were member of the conservative shadow cabinet and most member were shadowing the same department.

4. Like the Prime Minister on his cabinet, the Leader of the opposition has full authority over its shadow cabinet: he allocates portfolios, can appoint extra members or dismiss them. Reshuffles are common practice for shadow as well as actual Cabinets and they are generally driven by internal party reasons. Should be noted that the average minister tenure in the UK is roughly two years.

Let's now turn to Italy. Walter Veltroni, the leader of the incumbent governing party, presented his shadow cabinet in the aftermath of the 2008 general election to re-establish the Partito Democratico as the only "real" opposition party after a dramatic electoral defeat which left only two centre-of-the-left parties with some parliamentary representation (the Partito Democratico and Di Pietro's Italia dei Valori). Veltroni's shadow cabinet was appointed (not elected) more to reinvigorate a leadership crippled by a crushing electoral defeat rather than at the conclusion of an open leadership contest with a clear and recognised new party leader.

CONCLUSIONS

The greatest fear of any opposition party should not to be controversial but to be ignored. The most important role of the shadow cabinet is to put faces to policy agendas increasing the credibility of the opposition party as an alternative government team by associating specific people to specific policies.

A shadow cabinet which wants to be taken seriously starts by acting like an actual government literally occupying the ground of the

government both in term of policies and in terms of language. A perfect example is the preparation of a fully-fledged opposition budget that is usually presented immediately after the govern official budged is announced.

Although marred by an unclear mandate and a contested leadership, Veltroni's shadow cabinet was a good step in this direction. The Italian context is admittedly complicated: a much-needed electoral reform is in the air, we do not know if the PD will lead a party coalition at the election and it is unclear whether a further primary election will be called to choose a coalition leader. However, with the election of Pierluigi Bersani as party leader (primary election turnout 3.102,000), and the possibility of general election drawing closer, this is the perfect time for the Partito Democratico to prove its readiness presenting a credible government team before an election is called.

An identical, and indeed stronger, recommendation applies to an eventual coalition. Italian left-wing coalitions are notorious for lacking credibility and stability. The signing ceremony of a formal coalition agreement in 2006 (280 pages) elicited little confidence in the electorate, and quite understandably so. An electoral coalition would be ever more in need of putting faces to policies presenting a new credible government team to the Italian public before the next election.

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