

Preparing for government

How the official opposition should
ready itself for power



About this report

There will be a general election in 2024. This means the official opposition – Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party – has less than 12 months, and possibly fewer still, to prepare to enter government. This report sets out how parties should use their time in opposition to prepare for a possible transition into power.

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Summary

There will be a general election in 2024.* This means there is now less than a year left until the official opposition – Keir Starmer’s Labour Party, which has enjoyed a consistent poll lead over the Conservatives – could enter government.

If the polls are accurate and this transition happens, it will almost certainly happen overnight. Unlike in some countries, there is in the UK no waiting or ‘caretaker’ period between an election result being known and the winning party taking office. This transition can be dizzying: one day the shadow cabinet is in opposition, with few resources and no real power; the next, it is running the country.

The overnight nature of UK transitions means that the opposition must use the final 12–18 months before an election to prepare for power alongside campaigning. This is difficult: opposition leaders are understandably squeamish about the risk of looking complacent, the media frequently suggests opposition parties that focus on preparation are ‘measuring the curtains’, and resources are limited. Trying to win the election often comes first.

But the benefits of preparing for government cannot be overstated. Opposition parties that continue to focus on it will be better at governing – particularly in the crucial early years of a parliament. And any changes that opposition parties want to make will fare better if the leader, shadow ministers and their teams have plans in place before they enter office.

The current opposition has advantages and disadvantages in this endeavour. It is focused on preparation: shadow ministers have talked openly about the fact that detailed work is under way. Labour in 2023 has a more experienced shadow cabinet than the last time the party won a general election, in 1997, when none of the shadow cabinet had run a department at secretary of state level before; Starmer can boast three, while he himself has experience of working at the most senior levels of the civil service – as director of public prosecutions. He has some highly experienced former senior civil servants supporting him.

But time is running short. Access talks – when the opposition is granted access to the civil service ahead of a general election to discuss potential future working practices and relationships – would normally have been granted and begun at this point in the electoral cycle. And the context in which this election and potential transfer of power is taking place – of strained public finances, struggling public services and near-constant crises – is one of the most challenging for some time.

* The latest the general election can take place is 28 January 2025, though the prime minister has said he intends to hold one this year.

This report sets out key lessons for how any opposition party should use the final 12 months (or fewer) to prepare for government. It draws on interviews with senior former ministers, senior civil servants and former political and special advisers, as well as analysis of past transitions both in the UK and elsewhere. We highlight four specific areas the opposition should be working on: making the most of access talks, policy development and prioritisation, getting to grips with Whitehall, and preparing its people for government.

We put our lessons in context for the current opposition. It has been widely reported that the Labour Party has a preparation for government programme in place and it will already be undertaking much of the work we describe. This report makes the case for the importance of continued focus on preparation at the time when there will be pressures to pivot away from it, and sets out the priorities for the time remaining before the election.

Start access talks as soon as possible – and Labour should make the most of them

At the time of writing, access talks have not yet started, and time is running short – particularly if a May election were to take place. For both the 1997 and 2010 elections, the last at which there was a change of majority government, access talks began at least 16 months before the end of the parliament: Labour will have at most 12.

There have been reports that one of the reasons for this delay is that the prime minister has refused to pre-authorise access talks when asked by the cabinet secretary.¹ The convention on exactly who initiates access talks is open to some interpretation – in the past they have either been pre-authorised by the prime minister or simply authorised in response to a request from the opposition. This uncertainty is unhelpful.

The current version of *The Cabinet Manual* sets out that the prime minister should write to opposition leaders authorising talks in advance of an election.² If Rishi Sunak has refused to give pre-authorisation – despite the possibility of an election in May – this should be rectified as soon as possible. Access talks are an important part of preparation for government. They provide an opportunity for shadow ministers and civil servants to build relationships, and to share some core priorities.

- **The prime minister should immediately authorise access talks to start, and Keir Starmer should then request that they begin in January.** This will allow the civil service and shadow teams to start planning. Any later risks ceding valuable planning time in the event of an early election.
- **The constitutional convention for initiating access talks should be clarified and talks should be pre-authorised at the beginning of the parliament to avoid the potential for politicisation.** The timing and the process should be under the control of the cabinet secretary.

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- **Shadow teams should work out what level of detail they will share and when.** Shadow ministers tend not to share details of all priorities – for example, ahead of the 1997 election Labour’s plans to grant the Bank of England independence were not shared – but building agreement now for what will (and will not) be discussed will help focus minds.
 - **Labour should work with the Cabinet Office to arrange cross-cutting talks.** Not all policies are confined neatly within a single department’s brief – this is certainly true of some that make up Labour’s reform agenda. Most recent opposition parties have tried and failed to secure some form of cross-cutting talks. Labour should work with the Cabinet Office to develop a plan for talks in this format.

Develop policy in opposition to secure change in government

Devoting time to policy development in opposition pays off. Some of the most successful and enduring policies of the last three decades – including the national minimum wage, devolution, development of the windfall levy and academy expansion – were based on policy that had been developed, tested and planned from opposition.

Labour has already begun much of the policy work that is part of preparing for government. It should continue to build on this.

- **The leader of the opposition should finalise a clear set of policy priorities – and broker the necessary trade-offs between them.** The opposition will be developing a clear, agreed, limited set of policy priorities ready for government. If it has not already, prioritisation exercises (as run in 1997, 2010 and 2015) should start now, with the support of a central unit in the leader’s office and the backing of Starmer.
- **Detailed development is especially important for the most urgent policies.** At a minimum, the opposition should ensure it has a full understanding of necessary legislation – particularly any that will feature in the first King’s Speech of the new parliament – ahead of the election.
- **Machinery of government changes necessary to support cross-government missions should be planned in opposition.** Labour’s missions are cross-cutting and will probably require some rewiring of Whitehall. Delivering this kind of policy has always been a weak point in UK government, so preparation will need to assess how existing Whitehall systems will help or hinder delivery.

Get to grips with the state of Whitehall

No new government gets a blank slate – far from it. It inherits a system that includes a stock of existing policies and programmes, decisions to be made, crises to be handled and departments to run. Above all, it will inherit the current government's spending plans and fiscal constraints – which in the current context will present it with a set of very difficult decisions.

On top of this, government has been in and out of crisis response mode for years. Ministerial churn has been the highest at any point in recent history, bringing with it destabilising policy churn. Since 2016 alone, there have been five prime ministers, eight home secretaries and no fewer than 13 housing ministers. Industry has lost faith in government promises.

The power that resides in Whitehall has changed too. The evolution of devolution settlements has changed what decisions can be made in London and what decisions are made in Holyrood and Cardiff. At the time of writing the Northern Ireland assembly is not sitting, adding additional pressures on an incoming prime minister.

- **Each shadow team should develop organisational priorities for their department, where they have not already.** An incoming set of ministers will need to decide not just what the priorities are for the policy agenda of the department, but what these mean for the organisations that deliver them. This could include structural reforms or modernisation programmes that should form part of the early message to departments.
- **Shadow teams should focus on the 'how' as well as 'what' of their priorities.** Setting priorities is vital but as important is planning how they can be delivered once in office; for example, through existing departmental structures or new ones. This should be supported by departmental audit work looking at the current state of each department – including the health and performance of services and operations.

Prepare shadow teams for the shift to government

Getting the right people into government is one of the least-discussed aspects of preparing for government. But people will make or break a government: the Covid inquiry has highlighted just how damaging it can be when the 'people element' of the centre breaks down. This means spending time in opposition planning how people and teams will make any shift into government.

This is partly about continuity. After a period of such churn, departments will benefit from stable leadership, and new ministers will benefit from prior experience of shadowing the department they go into. But it also means investing time in making decisions about the mix of skills, personalities and experience that suit ministerial and political roles. Doing this now will enable a smoother transition.

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- **Prioritise continuity in personnel**, particularly in major policy portfolios, while considering the likely portfolios of junior ministers and how these will match up with the demands within the department. There should be no more reshuffles before the election.
 - **Political appointments should be agreed in advance of the campaign's conclusion** to ensure vetting procedures are timely and appointments fit the agreed structure of No.10. The structure should not be pulled in different directions to fit jobs that have been offered.
 - Labour should consider having its **list of planned core special adviser appointments** ready prior to concluding access talks with the Cabinet Office. These should then undergo vetting in advance of election day.

The task of preparing for government alongside trying to win an election can feel overwhelming, even indulgent. Opposition parties are often accused of 'measuring the curtains' when they focus on preparation. There is no legislation or civil service machine that kicks in and compels an opposition to consider the practicalities of governing. But history is clear: any opposition that is serious about winning and wants to achieve change should make this a priority in the final 12–18 months before an election.

In the final months before an election, the opposition must retain focus on preparation for government in the face of other pressures. Its plans for mission-led government are ambitious and long-term at a time when government – as both the leader of the opposition and prime minister admit – has been caught in a cycle of short-termism and crisis management. This planning is happening against a backdrop of highly constrained spending plans and with an uncertain election date. Time invested in preparing for government in this final period could be the difference between making change or missing the mark.

Introduction

In the UK the principal constitutional function of the opposition is to provide an alternative government. However, unlike in many other countries, that alternative government is expected to be in place – and governing – immediately after the result of a general election is known. Often this means an overnight transition.

This puts a premium on preparing for government while in opposition. With an election likely within a year from the time of writing, this report examines what this involves – what the key tasks facing the opposition are, the hurdles it faces, and how the task has been approached over the last few decades.

The report looks at the work any opposition party will want to do a year out from an election – but looks particularly at the context for the Labour Party now. The party has enjoyed a sustained poll lead – currently sitting at around 20 points – but has not been in government for more than 13 years. Even those who served in Tony Blair or Gordon Brown’s governments will remember a Whitehall markedly different to the one today. This increases the importance of good preparation. And this stage of the electoral cycle, a maximum of 12 months away from an election, is typically an intense period of preparation and campaigning. We therefore focus on practical steps that the party should be taking now and in some cases will have already started.

Preparing for government is difficult. Oppositions have nothing like the level of resources or information they would like. While there is a small amount of public funding to support political parties’ policy development, and some specifically to support opposition parties in their parliamentary duties, this does not alleviate the financial pressure that parties face and is not able to support preparation for government work specifically.

It is also difficult to find the time to do this work. The practicalities of life as the opposition can appear all-consuming. Parliamentary work must be done without the civil service support enjoyed by the government; there is also the need to ‘win back’ the electorate, possibly involving a rebrand of the party; and the party, and particularly the shadow cabinet, must maintain a constant media presence to critique the government and demonstrate progress in the polls, all while coming under pressure to explain what they would do differently.

Against these pressures, the detail of preparing for government can feel like an indulgence. Interviewees for this report repeatedly told us that as focus shifts to campaigning there is increasing resistance to devoting – or diverting – resources to such work. There can also be nervousness around oppositions being seen to be ‘measuring the curtains’, a recurring theme in preparations for government in the UK and other countries.

But unlike in other countries, there is in the UK no legislation or civil service machine that automatically kicks in and compels an opposition to consider the practicalities of governing. Even access talks with the civil service – and the quality and utility of those discussions – are in practice up to the opposition, and some in the past have not made the best use of these.

In short, effective preparation requires the opposition to take the initiative: to organise and commit to this work itself in the face of many opposing pressures. It is essential that it does so if it is to be able, on entering government, to hit the ground running and deliver on its priorities.

Drawing on the Institute for Government's previous work and interviews with politicians and civil servants in the UK and overseas, this report opens by looking at the importance of the opposition preparing for government, in the context of the UK's highly accelerated (and unusual) transfer of power. It then turns to the four main areas of such preparation that any opposition should focus on at this stage of the electoral cycle – and puts them in context for Labour: making the most of access talks; the process of developing policy in opposition; understanding the government system it might inherit; and preparing shadow ministers and political advisers for the scale of the shift to government.

The importance of preparation

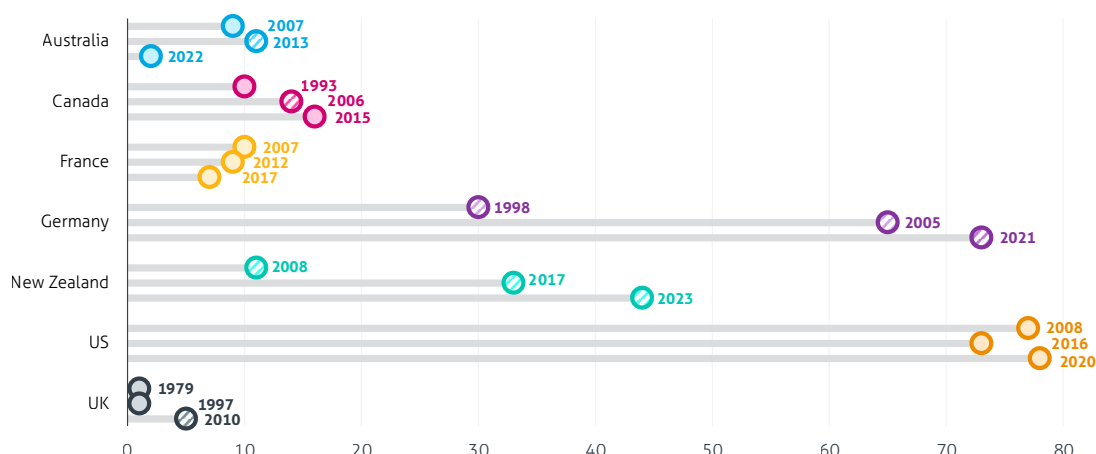
The value of preparing for government is underlined by the UK's idiosyncratic way of approaching potential changes of government. Because much of this process is done by convention, and many of these have evolved over the last century, there has been little formal consideration given to what might be sensible, or practicable. This is seen perhaps most starkly in the markedly shorter transition period after an election than almost any comparable democracy.

Few other countries transfer power as quickly as the UK

In the UK system, changes of government happen immediately. It is typically clear in the overnight constituency results, or the morning after, whether a party will be able to command a majority in the House of Commons. If there is a majority for the opposition, the monarch invites the leader of that party to form a government, after which the new prime minister is taken to Downing Street to make a speech, receive security briefings, appoint ministers and begin running the country usually less than 24 hours after the polls closed. This offers the leader of the victorious party no time, once the job of prime minister is confirmed as theirs, to reflect on how they might approach it. There is no time after the election to consider how their policies may be delivered, or how they want to run No.10 or wider government. They will be making decisions immediately.

This overnight transition is relatively uncontroversial in the UK. Tradition, as well as public and media expectations, weigh heavily on the process of government formation and new prime ministers are, if anything, all too keen to get started straight away – even if the magnitude of what they are taking on does dawn on some.*

Figure 1 **Days from polling day to appointment of head of government, selected countries and elections, 1979–2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of various sources. Notes: Hashed dots indicate coalition governments formed. Selected elections are the last three where there was a change in the head of government in each country. The heads of government used in this analysis are prime minister in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and UK; president in France and US; chancellor in Germany.

* Tony Blair says in his autobiography that as he walked up Downing Street for the first time his "predominant feeling was fear, and of a sort unlike anything I had felt before". See Tony Blair, *A Journey*, Hutchinson, London, 2010, p. 1.

Nevertheless, the UK is unusual in this regard. As Figure 1 shows, many other countries do not have such a rushed transition of government after an election – and where an election results in a change of leader, they typically have much more time to prepare between the election and taking power.

The US has a famously protracted and highly formalised transition period. Traditionally, presidential elections occur, alongside other federal elections, on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. But the inauguration date is set as 20 January the year after the election – some 70–80 days later, depending on the year. This time is spent in an intensive process of preparation, both for the president-elect themselves and for planning and approving the hundreds or thousands of political appointees.

This planning period is underpinned by the Presidential Transition Act 1963. Following amendments in 2010 and 2019, this legislation now sets an extensive list of obligations on all relevant parties, including that: presidential candidates receive office space and equipment on becoming their party's nominee, well before the election; after the vote federal agencies will assist and brief the president-elect's transition team; incumbent presidents establish a White House Transition Coordinating Council and Agency Transition Directors Council; and that support for the transition team remains available for up to two months after the inauguration. The transition team is effectively a medium-sized business.

Even without such a detailed statutory framework, leaders in other countries also have longer to prepare before taking office than in the UK. In Canada, incoming prime ministers have recently had a period of between 10 and 17 days between the election and being sworn in by the governor general. The length of this period is in the gift of the incoming government, and the time is used for intensive discussions with the Public Service, Canada's civil service, stress-testing the practicalities and costs of the policy platform, discussing the need for machinery of government changes, and constructing the 'mandate letters', which are issued to newly appointed ministers. Other countries have similar gaps. New French presidents are inaugurated within 10 days of the election, depending on when the incumbent's fixed term expires.*

Elsewhere, different electoral systems make coalition governments more likely. In Germany and New Zealand, for example, coalition negotiations have meant that government formation has taken place a considerable length of time, even months, after an election. And while coalition negotiations after Australia's 2016 election account for the 12-day transition, even the single-party majority returned in its 2007 election resulted in a wait of more than 10 days.

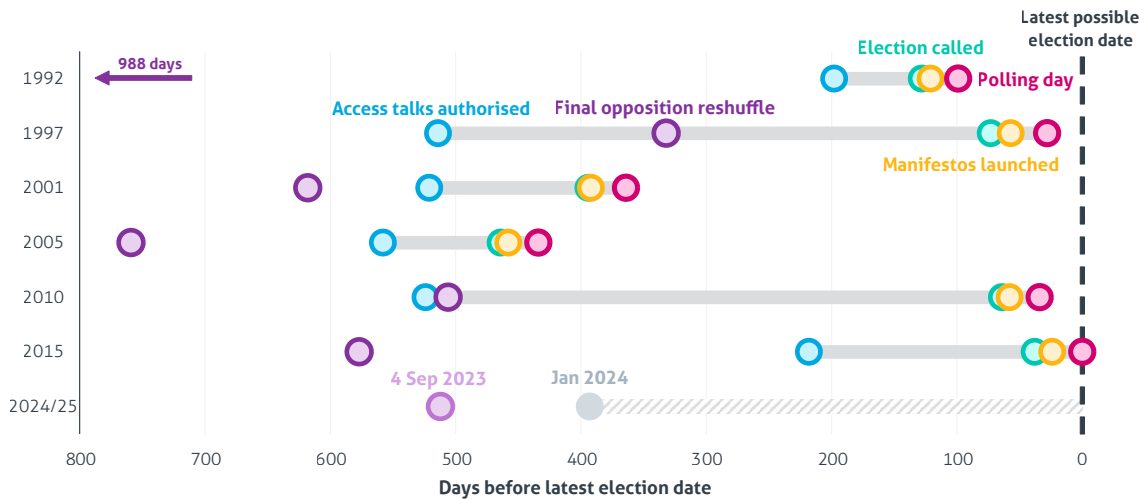
* It should be noted that the French prime minister, rather than president, is head of government. The prime minister is not directly elected, and is appointed by the president following the legislative elections which follow in the months after a presidential election.

The opposition must prepare to govern alongside campaigning in the 12–18 months before an election

In the UK, the absence of any such gap or formal transition period forces the opposition to prepare for government much in advance of an expected transfer of power, becoming most intensive in the final year before an election. The latest the next election can be held is 28 January 2025, meaning we are in that crucial final year.

As shown in Figure 2, for most elections since 1992 this is when some of the most decisive preparation activity and milestones have taken place. Access talks begin (or have already started), final opposition reshuffles conducted, and manifestos finalised and launched as part of policy development. To arrive at the election date prepared to govern, Labour will want to have reached all these milestones in 2024.

Figure 2 **Access talks and final opposition reshuffles before general elections, selected elections, 1992–present**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of various Hansard reports and press articles. Notes: Selected elections are general elections held within two years of the latest possible date, which excludes the 2017 and 2019 elections. The final opposition reshuffle in 1992 was 988 days before the latest possible election date (shown with arrow). Latest possible election date determined by relevant legislation at the time of election. Date of latest opposition reshuffle at time of publication is 4 September 2023.

Access talks

Access talks are an opportunity for the opposition to hold confidential talks with the civil service about its plans for government. They are (often, though the convention is unclear) formally requested by the leader of the opposition in a letter to the prime minister who, by convention, authorises the talks. At that point, the cabinet secretary and the Cabinet Office take responsibility for overseeing and organising contact between the two sides.

The experience of both former shadow ministers and former permanent secretaries shows that these talks can be a vital part of preparation for government – if conducted well. They offer both sides a chance to build relationships, develop a shared understanding of policy priorities and, to some degree, the challenges an incoming government will face in delivering them.

In short, access talks present both shadow teams and departments with the best 'ground level' preparation to plan for an effective transition.

Lessons for the opposition

Access talks have usually begun at this stage in the electoral cycle

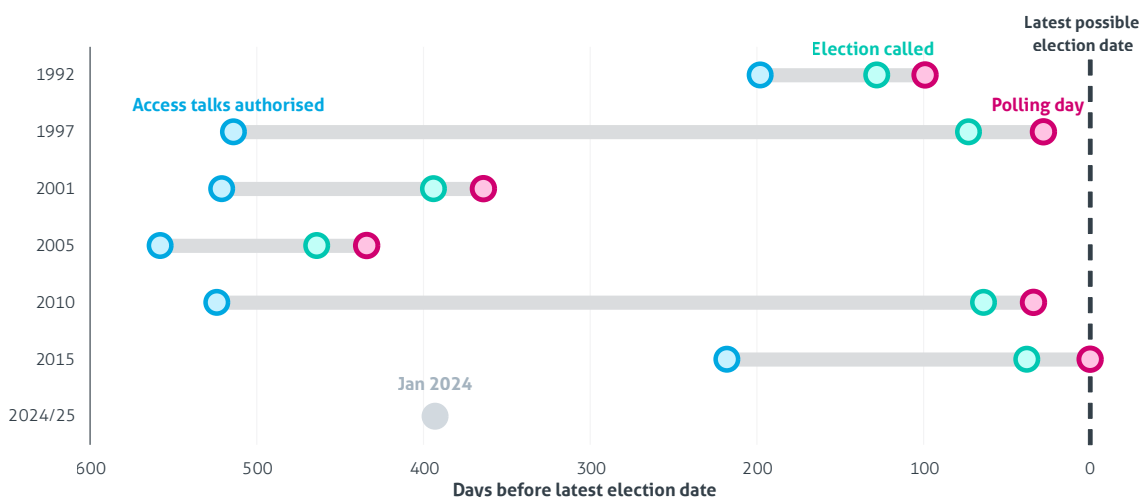
Access talks usually begin roughly 16 months out from the end of the parliament (that is, the latest possible date for an election to be held). This means, while there is no formal deadline to start talks, they are running late by recent standards – particularly in the event of an early election. The convention on exactly who initiates access talks is open to some interpretation – in the past they have been either pre-authorised by the prime minister or authorised in response to a request from the opposition. This uncertainty is unhelpful.

The current version of *The Cabinet Manual*, published in 2011, sets out that it is the role of the prime minister to authorise these talks as a general election approaches. It says: "At an appropriate time towards the end of any Parliament, as the next general election approaches, the Prime Minister writes to the leaders of the main opposition parties to authorise pre-election contacts with the Civil Service."¹ There has been some media reporting that the current prime minister refused advice from the cabinet secretary to give pre-authorisation, preferring to wait for the opposition to request access talks.* With an election potentially just months away and plenty of recent examples of prime ministers pre-authorising talks, this is hard to justify.

* Before 1997 the convention was that access talks would be initiated by a request from the leader of the opposition. See *Directory of Civil Service Guidance: Volume 2*, Cabinet Office, 2000, p. 18. During the 2000s, a convention appears to have arisen that the prime minister would 'pre-authorise' contacts at the beginning of the parliament and that opposition leaders would co-ordinate the beginning of this process with the cabinet secretary. The guidance has subsequently become very unclear. The current *Cabinet Manual* states that the prime minister authorises these contacts, but also states that they can only commence "once a request has been made and authorised by the Prime Minister", *The Cabinet Manual*, p. 16. This has created confusion about how access talks are formally initiated.

In 1997 and 2010, talks happened a long way out from the eventual election – Gordon Brown authorised contact between the Conservative Party and the civil service a full 15 months in advance of the 2010 election. While talks began far closer to the eventual polling day in 1992, 2001 and 2005, in the latter two cases this was still around 16 months before the latest possible date an election could have taken place.

Figure 3 **Pre-election access talks, selected elections, 1992–present**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of various Hansard reports and press articles. Notes: Selected elections are general elections held within two years of the latest possible date, which excludes the 2017 and 2019 elections. Access talks were authorised 51 days before polling day in 2017, and 59 days before in 2019. Latest possible election date determined by relevant legislation at the time of election.

There are some exceptions, usually when the election is not long planned. The 2017 snap election meant talks began on the day the election was called, while in 2019 they only began shortly before this point as the likelihood of an early poll became increasingly clear in the context of the Brexit process.² The other exception was 2015, when the date of the election was already set through the Fixed-term Parliaments Act and talks began just over seven months out.

The talks are largely about relationships and clear priorities

Talks tend to vary in quality and utility depending on the preferences, personalities and preparation of those involved. For shadows, the restrictions on what officials can discuss – avoiding policy advice and not revealing confidential government information – can be frustrating. But they can be of great worth to those officials in that they can

help prepare their departments for the transition. Without the talks the civil service only has public statements and the party’s manifesto on which to base its plans for different election outcomes. In the talks they can learn what the detailed plans are. The talks only work if people participate in them. Shadows can be incredibly busy, so finding the time for talks, and the time to prepare for them, is difficult. As a result levels of attendance and commitment have varied.

Often advisers can end up taking on the burden of preparation, and sometimes even the talks themselves. Ed Balls, an adviser to Gordon Brown in the run-up to the 1997 election, says that he and the team used the talks quite extensively “from the spring, early summer of ‘96” and that he saw Terry Burns, permanent secretary at the Treasury,

“maybe once or twice a week, for two or three hours at a time”.³ He thinks that he and Jonathan Powell, chief of staff to Tony Blair, used the talks “much more than anybody else had those kind of intensity of conversations and ours were very operational”.⁴ But Balls acknowledges that “Gordon [Brown], I think, may have had one meeting with Terry. Gordon was never going to engage, nor did Tony [Blair].”

Other shadows used them extensively, and to great effect. David (now Lord) Blunkett, shadow education secretary, similarly had many conversations with Michael (now Lord) Bichard, permanent secretary at the then Department for Education and Employment, who reciprocated Blunkett’s commitment to the meetings. These covered practical plans, not least for how the department would deal with Blunkett’s blindness on a day-to-day basis,⁵ but also focused closely on policy, given Blunkett had clear plans for the department and the literacy and numeracy strategies that were an early priority for the incoming Labour government.

For their part, too, officials’ approach to the talks varied. Not all permanent secretaries were as accommodating as Bichard – some subsequently expressed concerns that Bichard had stretched the interpretation of the talks and relations with Gillian Shephard, the incumbent Conservative education secretary, became strained.⁶ It is likely that the frequency of Balls’ contact would also have been questioned.

The regularity and overall number of access talks meetings has varied greatly across elections, and departments. In 1997 some permanent secretaries were concerned that shadows had not been in contact with them when their colleagues had already had several meetings.⁷ Some shadows might only have two or three meetings with permanent secretaries and the department, but other shadow ministers and advisers from their team might have many more. In early 2009, George Osborne was meeting Nick (now Lord) Macpherson, the Treasury permanent secretary, once every couple of months in the early stages of access talks, but he and his advisers ramped up the frequency as the election loomed closer and they got into more policy detail.⁸

Most shadows who found access talks productive put this down in large part to being given a chance to get to know the permanent secretary and other key officials. Shadows may have some contact with the department: officials will sometimes brief key opposition figures on major policy, when approved by the government, particularly on security and foreign policy issues under privy council rules. But by and large their knowledge of the department is defined by the opposition experience: critiquing the department and seeing the civil service serving their political opponents. This makes the talks a chance to start to build up trust and for shadows to understand how the department would serve them equally determinedly should they enter government.

Because of the restrictions on what permanent secretaries can talk about, shadows must have a clear sense of the policy priorities they want to discuss. For this reason, many oppositions are reluctant to start talks before they are clear on what their policy priorities will be.

Shadows and permanent secretaries should jointly develop a plan for the talks

Shadows and permanent secretaries should build a schedule for talks that reflect the opposition's policy priorities. Many former participants in these talks told us that it was helpful to have a more informal first discussion, so shadows and permanent secretaries could get to know each other, but then work with the department to develop a schedule for future talks where each meeting focused on a different theme. This allows the permanent secretary to prepare ahead of the meetings and for both sides to decide upon a cast of attendees that reflect the topics to be discussed.

Each session might cover a specific policy area; for example, reflecting the shadow's priorities for early action or covering specific sectors of the department's responsibility. In 2010, in at least one department, sessions were widened to eventually include all of the shadow frontbench and advisers for that department with directors-general from across the department.⁹

Plans for the talks also need to be mindful of the limits to what can be discussed, and how much planning is appropriate. The key rule, set out in 2010 guidance, is that civil servants cannot provide policy advice in the talks.¹⁰ For some shadows, especially when permanent secretaries interpret the remit of the talks very narrowly, this can prove frustrating and make the talks feel, in the words of one former senior minister who participated in them, "useless".

But it is more usual for some flexibility and discretion to be exercised. As one former permanent secretary put it: "You can ask questions and lay out five pages of analysis without the final page of conclusions."¹¹ During the 2005 election, one permanent secretary was worried that the Conservative Party's James review of potential savings in their department had major flaws that "risked creating unrealistic assumptions and would, therefore, restrict the then Conservative shadow if [they] took office". While the permanent secretary could not advise them, they could, and did, raise questions, allowing the shadow to work out the implications on their own.¹²

The opposition also needs to consider what it will share with the civil service. It will be concerned with not giving too much away – Brown famously did not share his plans for Bank of England independence during talks. But previous shadows have shared 'business plans' and even draft legislation.

While officials cannot work on policy proposals, nor develop draft legislation, in the campaign period they can work more extensively on preparing the department for all parties' policies. For the permanent secretary, the talks can be extremely useful for planning during the election campaign what kind of organisational changes they

would need to make to implement the new policies – such as making changes to the structure of the department; the creation of new public bodies; which staff need to be moved; or bringing in new skills and capabilities.

The opposition needs to be co-ordinated and press for cross-cutting talks

As well as focusing on access talks in individual departments, opposition parties need to ensure they are giving the civil service a consistent message across departments so that policies are joined up. The purpose of some of the Conservative Party's business plans and their pre-election discussions in 2010 was to make sure its initial legislative agenda was co-ordinated.

The opposition party leadership should consider how to co-ordinate the talks while allowing shadows the leeway to build their own productive relationships. Though permanent secretaries will keep the detail of the conversations confidential, they have in the past provided summaries to the Cabinet Office so that the cabinet secretary can ensure the civil service leadership has a clear view across departments.¹³

Oppositions should also plan for how to address major cross-cutting issues through the talks and be consistent on issues that overlap several departments. Many interviewees told us that they wanted to hold talks with more than one department to discuss shared issues but found these difficult to organise. The opposition and civil service need to prioritise cross-cutting talks if they want to get the most value out of the talks.

Past participants in access talks have also spoken about the problems that can occur when a minister ends up taking up a post they did not shadow and does not know what policies were planned. The opposition needs to be aware that the civil service will be heavily guided by the access talks in how they prepare for a possible change of government. If the message it is given proves to be incomplete, or personnel changes when a new government takes office lead to major changes in policy priorities, at best this can be a waste of effort. At worst it can mean that the department struggles to adapt to a new direction in the early stages of a new government. In 2015, Labour developed 'closure notes', which ensured central agreement on priorities and a record of important aspects of the access talks to mitigate such problems.¹⁴

Making sure that the civil service is getting a complete and consistent message will make a big difference to the success of any transition.

Shadows should make it clear to the leader's office if talks are going badly

Not all shadows find access talks helpful. Some permanent secretaries stick very rigidly to the rules around what they can discuss; in other cases, the relationship between a shadow and permanent secretary just doesn't gel. When the talks go badly there is often the risk that shadows give up on them entirely.

If problems arise because of miscommunication or misunderstanding, there is a lot that the Cabinet Office and others can do to try to solve the problem – if they are told about it. For instance, they can arrange wider talks so other members of the shadow team or other senior members of the department can take forward the relationship and focus on the detail, if this is wanted. There is value in ensuring that advisers and other senior staff in the department can move the talks on and make sure they are productive too.

But problems in these talks between shadow and permanent secretary can be a signal that the two will not work well in government. If so, it is valuable if the leader of the opposition and cabinet secretary are made aware of the problem. Most permanent secretaries will only provide a limited read-out of the meetings to the Cabinet Office. Shadow ministers may also not want to heavily involve the leader's office in their own talks. It is valuable for shadows and permanent secretaries to build a good relationship on their own. But both the leader of the opposition's office and Cabinet Office will need to consider how to make sure that teams are as effective as possible in any new government.

The context for Labour in 2024

The first challenge for Labour is the timing of any pre-election access talks. It could still have up to a year to hold talks, but with speculation rife about the possibility of an early election the party will also have to be conscious of that timetable being made shorter.

Key takeaways:

- **The prime minister should immediately authorise access talks to begin. Once this has happened, Keir Starmer should put in a formal request for them to start as soon as possible in January.**
- **The constitutional convention for initiating access talks should be clarified and talks should be pre-authorized at the beginning of the parliament to avoid the potential for politicisation.** The timing and the process should be under the control of the cabinet secretary.
- Shadow teams should **prepare for possible discussions, including what level of detail they will share** and when.
- Labour should be identifying **priority issues for cross-cutting talks and work with the Cabinet Office to ensure these kinds of talks happen.**

Policy development

Almost all opposition parties invest some time and resource in deeper policy development. In the 1960s, Edward Heath ordered thorough reviews of policy, involving outside consultants and the advice of former civil servants and ministers from the previous Conservative government. In the 1990s, Labour leader John Smith ran policy commissions in opposition to undertake 'deeper thinking' on issues including welfare reform.¹ In the late 2000s, David Cameron's opposition ran a 'preparing for government co-ordination exercise' from Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ). And in 2015, Ed Miliband's Labour opposition undertook a detailed process of policy audit and departmental analysis to ready themselves in the event of a win.

The energy, approach and resources applied to policy development and implementation planning in opposition has varied, but a constant is that parties that have devoted time and resource to policy development in opposition often find they are better able to set direction early in government and to secure lasting change.

This is not easy. Resources are strained. Public funds provided to opposition parties to support manifesto policy development are minimal and many shadow cabinet ministers will have just one or two advisors to support policy development.² Parties that have been in opposition for long periods usually lack experience of detailed policy making. Many of our interviewees repeatedly emphasised that opposition staffers are much more experienced at critiquing government positions than developing their own.

This section looks at why policy development and implementation planning in opposition is necessary and – drawing on historical and international examples – offers lessons on how to do it well.

Policy made in opposition sets the ambition and direction of new governments

Devoting time to policy development in opposition pays off – especially given the almost instant transfer of power in the UK* – and there are real advantages to undertaking some policy development and legislative planning in advance.

Some of the most successful and enduring policies of the last three decades – the national minimum wage,³ devolution,⁴ the development of the windfall levy, the expansion of academisation in 2010⁵ – were reliant on ideas, plans and in some cases legislation developed and tested in some detail in opposition. And having plans in hand ahead of getting the keys to No.10 enabled quick action. In 1997, for instance, Labour was armed with a blueprint for devolution that enabled it to hold referendums the same year and lay the relevant bills before parliament less than 12 months later.⁶ Introducing the minimum wage and granting independence to the Bank of England were similarly fast-paced.⁷

* The exception being the 2010 coalition government, which took five days to take power as parties negotiated.

Preparation means a new government can push priorities at a moment when it is most powerful. A lesson emphasised by several people we interviewed for this research was that the most ambitious policies should be sufficiently developed to move quickly, when political capital is high. And preparing for early action also sets direction for the civil service, who will be keen to respond to early direction. Gordon Brown's clear plans for the Treasury in 1997 enabled "rapid progress in the days after the election", according to the permanent secretary at the time.⁸

Opposition policy development also limits the risk that priorities get drowned out as the rest of government business takes over. The moment new ministers step foot into the bustle of government, hundreds of decisions, crises and the demands of business-as-usual will be thrust upon them. There will be little time for strategic policy development during all this (though there will be lots of policy generated in response to events). The priorities that are taken forward will often be those that have been nurtured in the months and years running up to the election.

Lessons for opposition

1. Set priorities and work through trade-offs from the centre

Opposition policies are often a piecemeal set of commitments and promises accumulated over years of opposition work in shadow ministerial teams, leader's speeches and the party's other policy-setting processes. Sometimes these policies are unclear, conflicting or only partially costed. Implementation issues are often given relatively little thought, let alone detailed preparation. As one interviewee who had been at the heart of opposition policy co-ordination in 2015 told us, opposition parties are "very good at making lots of commitments, but less good at prioritising and looking at how those commitments fit together into a coherent programme for government".⁹

For this reason, it is critically important that a dedicated central team is given the political 'cover' – that they are backed by the clout of the leader – to look across the commitments that have been made, agree priorities, work with shadow teams to drop or revise unworkable policies, and support shadow ministers in working through implementation issues for day one priorities.

The Conservatives ran a strong central coordination exercise for the 2010 election

In 1997, Labour was well prepared on key policies it knew it wanted to include in the first Queen's Speech. But in the run-up to 2010, the Conservative Party undertook a detailed and co-ordinated set of preparations for government that were unlike anything that had taken place previously, by any party.

Under the direction of Oliver Letwin, the party set up an 'implementation unit' headed by Nick Boles – the founder of the Policy Exchange think tank and at the time a prospective Conservative MP. It was based in CCHQ, staffed with secondees from the big four management consultancy firms, and looked at how key policies would be put into practice in government.

The exercise was not about *making* policy. It was about prioritisation and getting key policies lined up for the first days and weeks in government – working out legislative sequencing, money and whether new structures would be required. There were ‘feedback loops’ in Boles’ set-up – some aspects of prison reform, for example, looked to have an unrealistic timetable and policy was amended accordingly.¹⁰ (This clear line between policy formation and transition planning was also a distinction that featured in our study of overseas transitions – in the US, Joe Biden’s transition team in the lead-up to the 2020 election had a strong focus on planning the implementation of core policies but maintained a ‘firewall’ between their work on implementation and the campaign, which set policy.)¹¹

Cameron acted as a political sponsor for Boles’ work, at least to a point – with shadow teams presenting their plans to him. But he was sensitive to appearing complacent about winning the election. Engagement from shadow secretaries of state was also variable. We were told that Michael Gove, who had well-developed plans on the expansion of academisation and the introduction of free schools, happily worked with the unit to understand how his plans might interact with existing institutions. Andrew Lansley, on the other hand, was slow to take part. George Osborne was sceptical of the whole exercise – which tempered Cameron’s enthusiasm.

That the 2010 election returned a hung parliament and subsequent coalition government makes it harder to judge the extent to which the preparation work had eased the path of implementing immediate priorities. And the tepid engagement of Cameron and scepticism of Osborne meant shadow team engagement was mixed. But key figures from the period told us that “the value of the planning was not just the plans, it was the process”.¹² This was the first time a centrally co-ordinated preparation exercise had been attempted in an organised way to force trade-offs, prioritisation and implementation planning. And examples like academisation show it helped. The conversations and decisions it created helped prepare key Conservative figures for government.

Labour’s 2015 process extended the 2010 model and was too cumbersome

In the run-up to the 2015 election, Labour leader Ed Miliband agreed an even more detailed process of preparation co-ordinated from the centre – ultimately aiming to work through policy trade-offs, develop a full plan for every department and prepare shadow ministers. This model built on Labour’s efforts from Jonathan Powell, Patricia Hewitt, Charles Clarke and Sir Nicholas Monck in 1997,¹³ as well as the work undertaken by Boles ahead of 2010. From early 2014 onwards, a team with the political leadership of Lord Falconer and consisting of Miliband’s chief of staff Tim Livesey, Labour’s director of the Parliamentary Labour Party Wes Ball and Alan Buckle, a former chief executive of KPMG, worked with a small team of seconded consultants to undertake an ‘inside out’ review of every Whitehall department and audit of every policy commitment made in opposition and its implementation implications.

Like Boles' exercise in 2010, this work uncovered delivery challenges that affected policy development. It became clear, for example, that Miliband's pledge to build 200,000 new houses a year by 2020 would be impossible to deliver without training more plumbers, electricians and others.¹⁴ It was also helpful in exposing political decisions that needed to be made (for example, on early legislative priorities, or which shadow would lead on a certain area).

Again like the 2010 experience, it was not designed to set policy – this continued to be led by Miliband himself, party processes and the shadow teams.¹⁵ But as Boles found in 2010, the process struggled to get all shadow ministers engaged. Miliband gave it his broad backing, and a 'transition board' was set up with shadow ministerial representation. But the central unit lacked a powerful political sponsor to marshal its work on a day-to-day basis and figures around Miliband remained concerned it was a distraction from campaigning. Without senior political sponsorship, shadow teams found it easier to disengage.

Improvements in the form of better political backing and more streamlining would have made the process stronger. Attempts to draft full bills or produce 100-page slide decks on how departments and public bodies were structured largely replicated the first day briefings new ministers receive from the civil service. But overall, the process was still important in supporting preparation for access talks and the departmental analysis the team produced helped to identify delivery challenges that led to necessary policy iteration.

2. Complete a full review of existing commitments

Some policy commitments will no longer be fit for purpose as an election nears – the external context changes, greater knowledge of implementation challenges forces a rethink or policies that were attractive years prior to an election send the wrong signal as it draws closer. In the lead up to the 1997 and 2010 general elections, Blair and Cameron respectively focused hard on ensuring the policy commitments they had in place were giving the right signals about the kind of government they aspired to run.

Labour has already begun the process of looking at existing commitments – this process should be completed.

Successful opposition parties revisit existing policy commitments

Assessing and – in some cases – abandoning existing policy commitments is a standard feature of opposition, and particularly of opposition parties that go on to win elections. As part of the Conservative 'detoxification' process in the 2008–10 period, Cameron dumped a series of unpopular policies,¹⁶ including abandoning opposition to same-sex marriage and toning down rhetoric on immigration. Blair made similar moves to shift the perception of his party in the run-up to 1997, moving away from policies on nationalisation and adopting a more conditional approach to welfare – a process described by Blair's head of policy, David Miliband, as "bomb disposal", in identifying and getting rid of policies likely to lose votes.¹⁷

But just as important as cutting risky policies is testing the full stock of existing policy commitments against the core messages an opposition party aims to convey about the kind of government it will be.

In the 2000s, Oliver Letwin chaired the Conservatives' 'policy review' for Cameron – an exercise focused on assessing, amending and creating policies that chimed with the overall priorities of the Conservative Party ahead of the 2010 election. Lots of this focused on values – especially around developing policies on social breakdown and the environment. The review was less about specific ideas for implementation and more about ensuring the policy offer signalled to the electorate that the party was ready to govern.¹⁸

Blair did the same before the 1997 election. David Miliband again recounted being asked to test every policy commitment against Blair's determination to offer a new combination of social justice and individual freedom to voters.¹⁹

Some of this is a political exercise in preparing for the campaign, but policy review is also part of preparing for government in testing deliverability and beginning to prioritise and deprioritise policies that have been built up over years in opposition.

3. Build out the detail of the most immediate policy priorities

It is now received wisdom that opposition policy making should avoid too much detail. Universal Credit and the Lansley health reforms are often cited as examples of what can go wrong when too much is tied down before the resources of the civil service can support detailed policy development and testing. To an extent this is true: inflexibility once in government can hamper good policy delivery. But a clear lesson from the UK transitions in 1997 and 2010 is that policy priorities that make rapid progress in government tend to be planned in some detail in opposition – without setting things in stone.

Policy priorities were subject to detailed implementation work in 1997 and 2010

Gordon Brown was able to announce independence of the Bank of England only four days after he became chancellor because of the preparatory work he and Ed Balls had undertaken. Balls prepared a three-part paper outlining some of the main changes that would take place: the creation of a Monetary Policy Committee; taking financial regulation away from the Bank; and splitting off gilt sales and management to a separate body. As noted above, the proposals were not discussed in access talks but were worked up and then given to Treasury officials the day after the election.²⁰ Blair and his team were involved but even the new Labour cabinet was given just a few hours' notice of the announcement.* But despite the secrecy, the work undertaken in opposition enabled speed in government. This is something we

* Blair's autobiography says that Blair "allowed Gordon to make the statement" and says that he, Blair, had first suggested it to Brown when they were in opposition, though Brown had also come to the same conclusion. Blair says that he had favoured making the announcement before the election but Brown had argued market reaction meant it should happen straight after the election. See Blair T, *A Journey*, Hutchinson, London, 2010, pp. 113–4.

were told by interviewees for this paper – that opposition provides a freedom to do fresh thinking. Keeping too much on hold for discussion in government risks losing the boldness of opposition.²¹

The expansion of academy schools spearheaded by Michael Gove in 2010 was similarly enabled by work in opposition. The Academies Act 2010, which was on the books less than three months after the election, allowed for 'good' and 'outstanding' schools to convert to academy status without local authority approval. The development of this policy was less secretive than planning for Bank of England independence – the Conservatives' green paper on education started to outline their thinking and as the election drew closer, both Gove and Cameron were comfortable with talking about their plans in public. The front page of *The Times* announced that draft legislation for free schools and the expansion of academies was being written in opposition in early 2009,* and as discussed Gove was among the more committed participants in Boles' implementation unit in working through the implications for the Whitehall machinery.

But detailed planning should not exclude flexibility when in government

The introduction of Universal Credit had been developed in enormous detail in the 2000s in opposition with the support of the Centre for Social Justice – but in this case the firmness with which Iain Duncan Smith treated the plans developed prior to the election became a problem.²² Timetables were unrealistic and key implementation problems like access to IT were not given sufficient attention. More flexibility upon entering office would have made for more successful policy.

The lesson from history is not that every detail of policy implementation should be fixed but that deep and serious planning for key priorities is a common factor in policies that have been successful after transitions of government.

Stress test contentious policies

Some policies are controversial. Opposition is an opportunity to engage with stakeholders who have concerns. Even policies that today enjoy high levels of cross-party and public support, like the national minimum wage, were once contentious and were subject to a lot of opposition work to build support. Some of this work has already been undertaken by the current opposition, and time is now running short for much further activity in this space. Nonetheless, the opposition should look for opportunities to continue testing and iterating key policies with important stakeholders in the time that remains before the next election.

National minimum wage: an exemplar in building support for a controversial policy

The minimum wage is considered one of the major policy successes of the last 40 years.²³ But in the mid-1990s, the policy was not universally popular, with the question of at what level the wage should be set particularly troublesome. To manage this, the Labour Party established a set of processes aimed at building support for a minimum wage and overcoming implementation problems it might encounter in government.

* It was reported in the press in early 2009 that draft legislation for free schools and the expansion of academies was being written in opposition.

Between 1994 and 1997, party officials worked to build the case for a minimum wage – using new academic evidence to counter the argument that a minimum wage leads to job losses, and building mechanisms like the Low Pay Commission to take responsibility for setting wage levels out of the hands of politicians (an innovation that helped reduce the opposition of business groups like the CBI).²⁴ It also established groups to work through detail that would enable the policy to be implemented quickly, such as the treatment of specific groups like au pairs, and how to ensure compliance from employers.²⁵

The preparation in opposition gave ministers, in the words of Geoffrey Norris, a special adviser to the No.10 policy unit at the time, “an enormous advantage in terms of getting on and implementing it. And I think that’s a very important policy lesson.”²⁶ Shadow ministers had been able to give civil servants detailed advance notice of the proposals, which meant legislation could be announced in the Queen’s Speech just two weeks after the election.²⁷

The Lansley health reforms demonstrate the risks of neglecting this support building

Conservative opposition work on the NHS reforms that eventually became the Health and Social Care Act 2012 was less successful. Andrew Lansley, who shadowed the health brief for six and half years before taking it on, published a white paper on his key ideas and gave speeches at major health conferences. But a combination of factors meant the eventual plans in government were the subject of enormous backlash, delay and protest.

This was partly down to the difficulties of negotiating health policy in the context of a coalition government. But the way policy was developed in opposition did not help. Polling suggested the public were not keen on more NHS reorganisations – prompting Cameron to pledge to avoid them. As a result, Lansley said less about his plans the closer the election got. On top of this, we were told that Lansley was not very engaged with policy co-ordination processes run out of Cameron’s office to prepare for government – and the team around the leader was never fully on top of Lansley’s plans.²⁸

Policies were not subject to the level of stress-testing and coalition-building that the minimum wage policy had been. Lansley’s NHS reforms became stuck in a soup of confusion and opposition in government, and the legislation that was eventually enacted years later required the Conservative Party to expend political capital on getting there.

The context for Labour in 2024

Labour has already begun much of the policy work that is part of preparing for government – at the start of 2023 it launched its five missions and has started to develop detail beneath them. The task now is to finalise a clear, limited and detailed set of priorities. Manifesto development will help with this but is not the same as preparing policy for government. This will involve hard choices about which policies are priorities and which are not – working through trade-offs and building detailed implementation plans.

This will mean finding the resource to do this as campaigning activity increases and potential election dates draw nearer; getting the balance between developing detail and maintaining sufficient flexibility; and making difficult decisions on which policies are of sufficient immediate importance to justify that upfront work, and which are not.

There are some challenges facing the current opposition that make implementation planning harder than usual. Many of Labour's core priorities are likely to be cross-cutting. The missions – a guide to Labour's headline priorities – are long-term, cross-cutting ideas that each rely on multiple departments, public bodies, devolved and local governments as well as industry and civil society. Delivering cross-cutting policies has long been a weak spot in UK government so part of its planning will need to look at how existing systems will help or hinder these priorities, and what needs to change to support the missions.

Key takeaways:

- **The leader of the opposition should finalise a clear set of policy priorities and broker trade-offs relating to those priorities.** Opposition policies are often a large and piecemeal set of commitments and promises made over many years and by many people. In 1997, 2010 and 2015, prioritisation exercises were run to agree priorities, work through trade-offs and revise policies that were unworkable. This work should be undertaken now with the support of a central unit in the leader's office. The opposition should have a clear, agreed, limited set of policy priorities ready for government.
- **The team leading this work needs high-level, sustained political cover from the leader's office.** The fear of seeming complacent about victory is understandable and real – but the benefits of giving impetus to preparation work outweigh the risks.
- **Priority policies – including those that will feature in a King's Speech, or on which rapid progress is needed – should be developed in detail in opposition.** It has become a common refrain that opposition parties should avoid working up priorities in detail. But a firm lesson from the UK transitions in 1997 and 2010 is that rapid progress in government relies on detailed policy and implementation planning in opposition. Bank of England independence, devolution, the minimum wage and academisation expansion all underline this point (while the overly rigid planning of Universal Credit serves as a reminder to build in some flexibility too). At a minimum, a full understanding of necessary legislation, timing and key delivery plans, should be in place.

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- **Where possible, machinery of government changes necessary to support cross-government missions should be planned in opposition.** It seems almost certain that some changes to the machinery of government – particularly the centre of 10 Downing Street, the Treasury and Cabinet Office – would be required to support the delivery of Labour’s missions. Serious changes need to be planned and tested in advance of any transition into government. Such reforms always involve time and money and take often take years to fully bed in.²⁹ But early progress will be important to signal intention and provide leadership to Whitehall from the outset of any transition.

Preparing to run a department

New governments cannot just focus on the policies they want to bring in. They inherit everything the previous government was doing (or not doing): decisions already taken, money already committed – and problems not dealt with.

They must also, quickly, get to grips with the system of government, which will have changed since they or their party were last in government, and work through what that means for their own policy priorities.

Life in government feels very different to opposition

In opposition the premium is on campaigning and positioning the party and its policies to win an election. In government, new ministers become responsible for leading organisations and a civil service of nearly half a million people. They inherit systems, policies and processes built by and for their predecessors and spend much of their time making decisions on issues beyond their own proactive policy priorities – many of which may never have crossed their desk in opposition.

New ministers and special advisers need to understand the system of government to be effective. This means both understanding the formal processes – how ministers are brought into decision making, how departments agree policies that cut across different briefs, how money is allocated – and the culture and behaviours that drive government.

A major change for new ministers is adjusting to their being at the heart of a vast system of people and processes. This is a marked change from opposition, where shadow ministers work in close proximity to each other and have relatively small teams of other frontbenchers and political advisers. Once in government, ministers find themselves physically spread out across departments and feeling separated by layers of process and systems in place to ensure that relevant discussions are recorded, interactions formalised, actions kept track of and problems escalated.

The permanent secretary for the department and the private office are critical relationships for navigating this web of bureaucracy. There are good reasons for many of the long-standing ways of doing things, but there are also ways to navigate through these processes without letting them slow progress or suffocate activity. Clashes will often occur and problems will likely arise that generations of ministers have faced, and many have wanted to fix. Good private offices and permanent secretaries will adapt to individual preferences to help their minister understand and navigate the system effectively. But even with this support, the adjustment can be challenging.

Government ministers are responsible for large, complex organisations

The transition from opposition into government as a minister is a transition from having a team supporting you that can all sit in one room and have one conversation, to having a department of thousands or tens of thousands based across multiple sites in multiple parts of the country or even overseas.

Civil servants will want new ministerial team to set the tone and direction early

New ministers will find an army of officials waiting for their direction on a whole suite of policy issues from the off. Those officials will have been trying to interpret opposition speeches, scouring the manifesto and analysing the opening speech to the department for any kind of signal about what may be in store for the policies or services they are responsible for. There will be a suite of rapid decisions a new minister is asked to make in the early days or weeks of a new government entering office. Most parts of the department will be vying for attention from the minister to try to understand priorities, make progress on long-standing issues or just to start building relationships.

New ministers become responsible for systems that deliver vital day-to-day services, many of which rarely get attention from the opposition unless something significant has gone wrong. Those services are often at arm's length from ministers – either formally, with public bodies running the day-to-day operations, or informally, due to ministers spending most of their time focusing on other parts of their brief. But new ministers become responsible for their performance and accountable to parliament – and a new opposition – if anything goes wrong, even if they were not aware of it prior to taking on the role.

In 2010, after a consultation on public bodies issued by the Treasury included mention of the Forestry Commission, headlines that the government was planning on “selling off forests” became a problem for the new environment secretary, Caroline Spelman. After a massive backlash, Spelman says she felt she had no choice but to U-turn on a policy that didn't come from her: “Perception is reality in politics, and the only way I could bring that crisis to an end was to take full responsibility for it.”¹

Officials will also want to know what a new ministerial team will mean for their organisation – not just the policy areas it is responsible for. Some departments have cultures and systems that have endured over multiple ministerial teams and changes in government. Other departments, or parts of departments, have a culture that almost entirely reflects the personal preferences of a long-standing minister. This means a change in government, and ministerial teams, can disrupt – for better or worse – the culture and the relationships between ministers and the officials in the department.

It is not just officials who will want time with a new ministerial team. The relevant public bodies and external stakeholders will want to get to know them too. This can be an extensive list: a new environment secretary, for example, will have organisations from the Environment Agency and Natural England through to RSPB and NFU waiting to hear exactly what they plan to do on their areas of policy.

High ministerial turnover in recent years means that many civil servants have experienced a change of minister, including the prime minister, and wholesale changes of ministerial teams. But long periods between changes in the party of government mean that civil servants will have far less experience of the wider changes that these can bring. Oppositions preparing for government should also be conscious of what they take for granted in how their party operates, the key personal relationships at its heart and its language and philosophy.

It can take time for the civil service to fully understand these changes, despite its preparations. This is a tricky balancing act. Officials reflecting on the 2010 transition say that they probably focused too much on learning the lessons from 1997 – resulting in a strong focus on people and relationships. In 1997, many felt they fixated too much on policy and did not consider people, felt particularly acutely given the dynamic of individuals in Blair’s No.10 or the intricacies of the Blair–Brown relationship.²

In the end, in 2010, relationships were not as much of a problem as had been anticipated: David Cameron and George Osborne worked very well together, and the core ‘quad’ relationship between them and their Liberal Democrat colleagues – Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander – also functioned well. Instead, as one official put it, they thought a lot about changing the furniture in the room, but didn’t consider how the entire décor had changed.³ The ways of making decisions, the language they used, the public service solutions they were used to ministers wanting – all these things were different under a Conservative-led government. In 2010, the Institute for Government produced a ‘lexicon’ to demonstrate the different words and ideas that Conservatives preferred to Labour, but this barely scratched the surface.⁴

Lessons for the opposition

Labour has a shadow team with more ministerial experience than Blair’s first cabinet in 1997, as outlined in the final chapter of this report. If the current shadow team were to enter government with the same briefs they hold now, following an election in late 2024, they would have more experience in that role than their predecessors in the 1997 and 2010 transitions. But there are still two key lessons for their preparation:

1. Spend time understanding Whitehall as it is now

Even for new governments with some prior experience in office, it is still necessary to understand how government has changed. In 1997, Labour had been out of power for 18 years; in 2010 the Conservatives had been out for 13 years. Should Labour gain power in 2024–25 the gap will be similar (14 years).

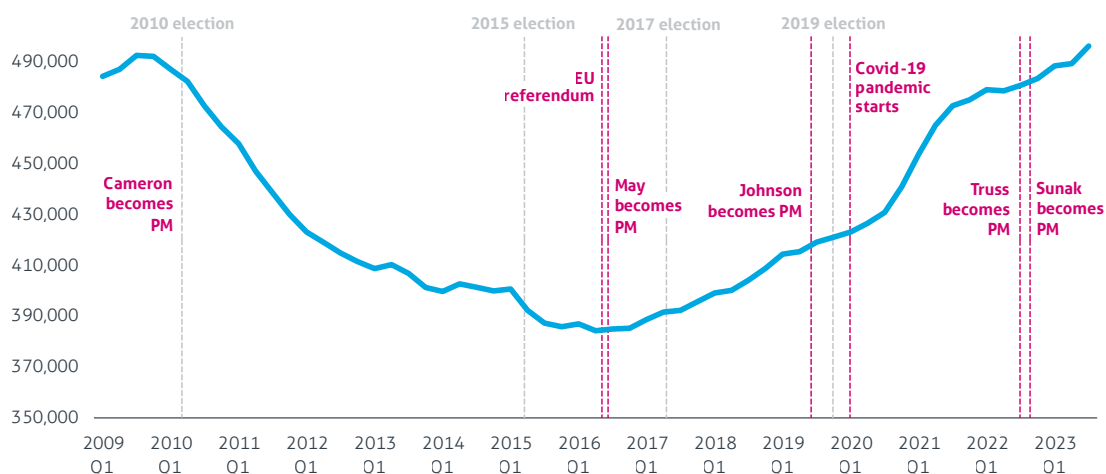
If a week is a long time in politics then periods exceeding a decade is a lifetime. And each of those periods has seen substantial changes in how government works – how money is budgeted and reported, the development of electronic communication, changes to the structure of the civil service.

As important are the significant changes to the context in which governing is done. Since Labour was last in power the predominance of 24-hour news coverage and social media has grown, while a series of crises and shocks – Brexit, the pandemic, war in Europe – have all raised the temperature in Whitehall and in the country, where trust in politicians is at record lows.⁵ All this requires ministers to anticipate that, if they have experienced government before, it may not be the same now.

The fiscal context facing the next government will likely necessitate major decisions on departmental spending, requiring an understanding of departmental systems and budgets from both the centre and within departments. The current spending review period runs up to the end of March 2025, with incredibly tight plans pencilled in beyond this. Day-to-day departmental spending (RDEL) is set to rise by 0.9% per year in real terms between 2024/25 and 2027/28.⁶ However, once existing spending commitments on the NHS long-term workforce plan, defence and foreign aid are accounted for, this equates to real terms spending *cuts* of 1.4% per year for other public services. Forecasted rises in demand, most notably in the criminal justice system, will squeeze some services further under existing plans.⁷

There have also been major changes to the size and structure of the civil service since 2010. Coalition government cuts led to the number of civil service full-time equivalent (FTE) roles falling to the lowest level since the Second World War by the time of the EU referendum, followed by a 27% growth in the civil service between the referendum and 2022.⁸ On top of this, the past two years have seen the highest levels of civil service staff turnover, made up of leavers and inter-departmental transfers, since 2010.⁹

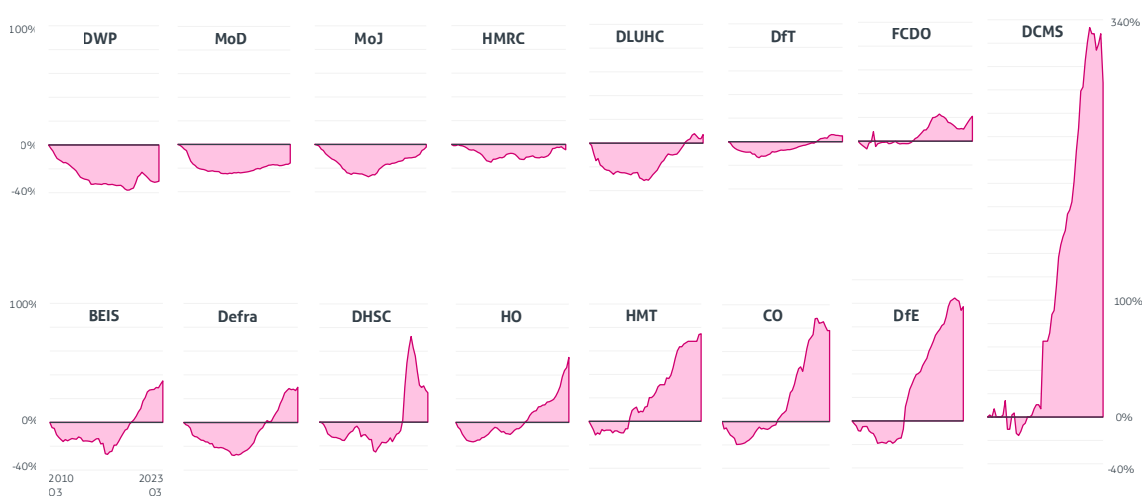
Figure 4 **Civil service staff numbers (FTE), Q1 2009 to Q3 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Public Sector Employment Data (Table 9), Q1 2009 to Q3 2023.

These changes, however, have varied across departments. Large, operational departments experienced the greatest reduction in numbers in 2010–16, and have seen proportionally smaller increases subsequently. The Home Office is a notable exception to this, with a 31% net growth in civil servants since 2010, largely due to the additional capacity required for migration, citizenship and border services following the UK’s exit from the EU.

Figure 5 **Change in civil servant numbers (FTE) by department between Q3 2010 and Q3 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Public Sector Employment Data (Table 9), Q3 2010 to Q3 2023. Notes: Figures relate to departmental groups. Figures for FCDO before the merger of FCO and DfID are the sum of the figures for the two component departments; the same applies for BEIS before the merger of BIS and DECC. BEIS ceased to exist in February 2023, and the last release of figures was Q2 2023. DIT, DESNZ, DBT and DSIT are not shown as they were not in existence in 2010. These figures exclude transfers of staff that were the result of machinery of government changes.

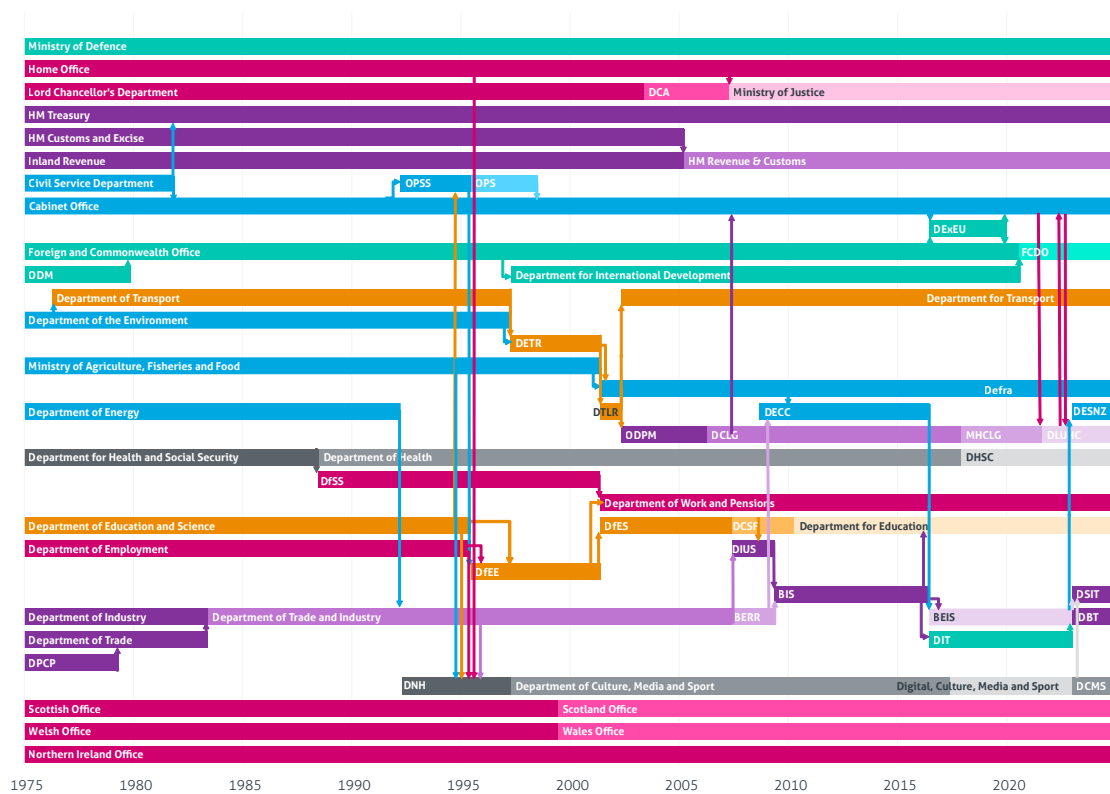
Machinery of government changes are a long-standing feature of the Whitehall system, and mean government rarely looks the same as former ministers would remember it. In addition, coalition government reforms to merge and abolish 'quangos' led to a 62% reduction in the number of arm's length bodies between 2010 and 2020, with their functions and responsibilities often transferred to their parent departments.¹⁰

At a ministerial level, the cycle of churn has become more extreme than at any point in recent history. Since 2016, there have been five prime ministers, eight home secretaries and 13 housing ministers. In 2022 there was twice as much churn in cabinet appointments as in any year since at least 1990.* In addition, numerous scandals have strained relationships between ministers and civil servants.¹¹

Ministerial churn has also led to policy churn, with new ministers prioritising new initiatives and sidelining their predecessors' perceived pet projects. That, on top of the extraordinary crises the system has had to manage, has meant departments have become used to developing policy at breakneck pace and bypassing meaningful consultation, without time for pilots or iteration. The system is often more geared towards policy for press release than long-term delivery of political priorities. This is something new ministers will also want to consider – and put right.

* There were 67 cabinet appointments in 2022, compared with a previous high since 1990 of 33 in 2019. Source: IfG ministers database.

Figure 6 History of departmental reorganisations, 1975 to 7 February 2023



Source: Institute for Government analysis of data from House of Commons, and Butler D and Butler G, *British Political Facts*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1986.

Devolution has also changed the power that resides in Whitehall since 2010. There has been further devolution to Holyrood and Cardiff, including transport policy and some tax-raising powers. Brexit and prolonged periods without a functioning government in Stormont have affected Westminster’s relationship with Northern Ireland. English devolution has also broadened and deepened. By 2025 some 57% of England’s population is expected to be covered by a devolution deal, up from 21% just 10 years earlier.¹² Deeper regional devolution, including the ‘trailblazer devolution deals’ in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, has shifted decision making power away from Whitehall. During this time, however, relationships between central and devolved governments have been strained by Brexit and the pandemic response,¹³ with the latter in particular highlighting poor working relationships with local government.¹⁴

The landscape of systems for policy delivery, from Whitehall departments to local delivery organisations, has changed too. These changes are perhaps most evident in the NHS, where successive major reforms have shifted power and responsibilities between various bodies. Integrated care systems (ICSs) have statutory responsibility for most local NHS services in England as of July 2022, but they remain accountable to NHS England – an executive non-departmental public body established in 2012 as part of the Lansley reforms. The health secretary, however, has overall oversight of NHS delivery, with their directive powers over NHS England enhanced following the Health and Care Act 2022.¹⁵

2. Think about any changes to departments

The success of education policy in the first years of the New Labour government shows how setting clear priorities can help drive effective departmental organisation. Leading up to the 1997 general election, David Blunkett and the Labour leadership made improving educational standards a key priority. To deliver on this once in office, Blunkett established the Standards and Effectiveness Unit (SEU).¹⁶ The unit was formed in May 1997 and supported development of the *Excellence in Schools* white paper, which was published in July 1997 and laid the foundation for the School Standards and Framework Act, which passed a year later.

The success of the new SEU within the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) was in part due to extensive preparation in opposition. Michael Barber, Blunkett's adviser who would go on to lead the SEU, had led a literacy task force, which both developed policy and recommended the SEU be established to support its implementation.¹⁷ Barber met the DfEE permanent secretary, Michael Bichard, during access talks to outline the literacy task force's recommendations.¹⁸ Through understanding the system and communicating his priorities, Blunkett and his team were able to use a new unit in the department to deliver on their priorities.

But this too is a balancing act: overloading a department with change upon change in a drive to make progress can slow a new ministerial team's progress. Following Iain Duncan Smith's appointment as secretary of state for work and pensions in 2010, there was clarity regarding his priority to implement Universal Credit, but an overload of policies in the department. In addition to Universal Credit, the department was working on 11 major projects while attempting a restructure that would bring 40% efficiency savings to corporate overheads as agreed with the Treasury.¹⁹ This led to overload and ineffective delegation of responsibility, which may have contributed to issues in implementing Universal Credit.²⁰ In 2015, the National Audit Office found that although DWP was able to "accomplish a great deal", it "did not have sufficient understanding of its portfolio of programmes or overall capacity".²¹

Making successful structural changes in a department requires an understanding of how the system works, including arm's length bodies, devolved structures and external stakeholders. In 2010, the coalition government outlined plans to "strip away government's unelected, inefficient quangos" as part of a drive to save money and reduce unnecessary government activities.²² An early change made by Eric Pickles as secretary of state for communities and local government was to abolish the Audit Commission. However, some in the commission criticised a lack of understanding of its role and what would replace its functions within the Department for Communities and Local Government, and argued this may have contributed to issues and delays that arose during its abolition.²³ Abolishing the commission was not straightforward, and a number of issues following its announcement in August 2010 meant it continued to operate until March 2015.²⁴ Since then, there has been a large increase in the prices local authorities pay for auditors and procuring sufficient auditing capacity has been difficult.²⁵ The government has recently committed to recreating some of the Audit Commission's former functions.^{26,27}

Separate from the organisational structures within a department, the culture is set from the top. Civil servants will be sensitive to the tone and direction set by their minister, particularly following a change of government, which is an important lever a new minister can use to influence how the organisation will function and deliver.²⁸ Opposition is an opportunity for shadow ministers to consider how they will set a departmental culture that is in line with their priorities. Preparations with the wider ministerial team, political advisers and senior civil servants in access talks can help lay the groundwork for the organisational culture they will set.

The context for Labour in 2024

The system that a possible Labour government would inherit is one heavily geared towards short-term response and reactive policy. The delivery systems – departments and public bodies, including those at different layers of government and involving external stakeholders – will be different to those of the most recent Labour government. Getting things done will mean understanding what those delivery systems look like, and where their strengths and weaknesses lie.

The fiscal context, which any new government will inherit, puts an even greater emphasis on understanding departments and their responsibilities. Given the very tight public spending settlements and assumed savings over the next parliament, it is very likely departments will need to make major decisions on service provision and spending.

Key takeaways:

- **Shadow teams should build out their understanding of the delivery system for each of their priorities.** This should be supported by departmental audit work looking at the current state of each department – including the health and performance of services and operations. In some instances, there will be an opportunity to build strong relationships with the key players outside Whitehall prior to entering government.
- **Shadow teams should consider where departments might need to change to meet their priorities.** This might include structural reforms or modernisation programmes that should form part of the early message to departments.

Preparing people for government

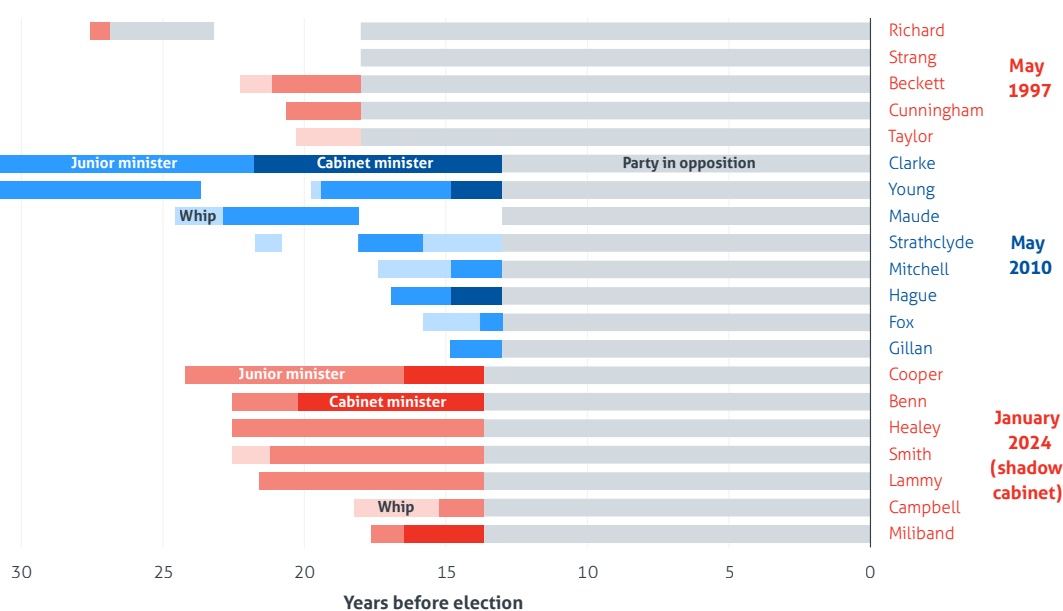
People are crucial to successful government. Yet getting the right people into government is one of the least-discussed aspects of oppositions' preparation work. From prime ministers choosing their ministerial team and ministers choosing their advisers, to the functioning and culture of No.10, people and how well they work together are fundamental to good government.

The Covid inquiry has highlighted just how damaging it can be when this 'people' element breaks down. Reports of infighting between different factions in No.10, the capabilities of top officials, the competence of the prime minister himself – we now know that these were major concerns of senior officials and political figures at the height of the pandemic. For new governments, it is particularly important to get the right people lined up for the right roles – and think about how to help them adapt to government quickly. This has not always been the case.

The current shadow cabinet is more experienced than in 1997

Since 1979, the long periods of government dominated by one of the two main parties has meant that many new ministers, secretaries of state and even prime ministers start their careers in office with no experience of government whatsoever. The first ministerial roles that Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and George Osborne held were their positions at the top of the New Labour and coalition governments respectively.

Figure 7 **Cabinet/shadow cabinet ministers with previous ministerial experience, May 1997, May 2010 and January 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of IfG ministers database, and Butler D and Butler G, *British Political Facts*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Notes: Cabinet minister includes all ministers attending cabinet. Junior minister includes parliamentary under-secretaries and ministers of state.

The current Labour shadow cabinet is relatively experienced when compared to the 1997 intake, and broadly comparable to the Conservative intake in 2010. As Figure 7 shows, seven current shadow cabinet ministers held ministerial office in the New Labour years, all for considerable periods of time. This is only one fewer than was the case of the newly appointed cabinet ministers in 2010, and two more than their Labour colleagues in 1997. And three of the current shadow cabinet have run departments before – none of the 1997 shadow cabinet had been a secretary of state before.

This experience is an advantage for the opposition. But there are other issues related to 'people' they need to consider when preparing for government too: how to maintain stability in the event of a transition, planning for a functional No.10 and the transition of advisers – who they should be, and supporting them to make the transitions from advising in opposition to advising in government.

All of this is understandably a lower priority than trying to win an election. But it is a necessary part of effectively transitioning to government and should be done before ministers are in post and events take over. After all, new governments never get another chance to make sure they are ready to hit the ground running.

Lessons for the opposition

1. Prioritise effectiveness and stability in appointments

The appointment of ministers to departments is one of the most visible actions of any new government. The parade of politicians entering the famous black door, the rumours of who has what job, followed by the official announcements, is the focus for the media in the hours and days after a new government is formed. Behind the scenes it is a process run by a handful of key people: the prime minister, their chief whip and top advisers, but also senior officials informing Buckingham Palace of each appointment and making sure that filling out the whiteboard* of ministerial roles doesn't lead to any glaring mistakes.

Some choices are highly political: rewarding loyalty, placating foes, balancing the wings of their party. Good media operators might be put in highly visible roles, good political operators given charge of highly contentious policy areas. Sometimes changes are made – a team that performed well in opposition roles may not translate as well into a ministerial brief. Coalition negotiations throw up further variables: in 2010, Liberal Democrats were given cabinet roles that the Conservatives, planning for a majority, would have had names lined up for.

The effectiveness of those ministers at doing the job – whether they know the policy area, understand the detail and the stakeholders, are good at making decisions – sometimes plays a role, but is not often front and centre.

* There is now a digital whiteboard

Having shadowed a role allows a new minister to get on top of their brief more quickly, and establish a good relationship with other new ministers holding related briefs. It also means they will have been involved in access talks and – hopefully – the other preparatory exercises outlined in this report.

Maintain continuity in roles between opposition and government

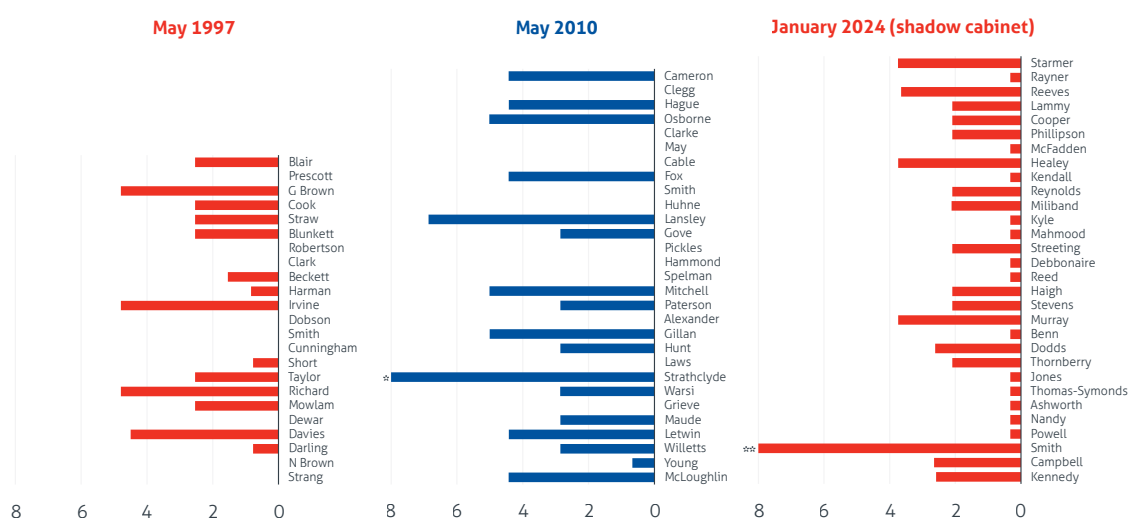
This relationship between shadow experience and effectiveness is borne out in history. As covered earlier, in both 1997 and 2010 the transition of the ministerial teams and their advisers into the Treasury and the education department made a more effective start to government because in these instances they had experience of the brief in opposition.¹ But elsewhere the transition was not as smooth, and some departments ended up with ministerial teams who did not gel, who were inexperienced or who lacked a good understanding of government.

Alan Milburn, a minister of state for health in 1997, attributes this lack of forethought as a major reason why health policy struggled in the first Labour government:

“It’s no coincidence that the two areas of public policy when New Labour hit the ground running were economic policy and education policy. Why? Because there was continuity in personnel... That didn’t happen with health. We had a different guy, Chris Smith, who was the shadow health secretary, and then Frank Dobson became the actual health secretary. Changing personnel... is a curse in modern politics.”²

The current shadow cabinet would be more experienced than the incoming Labour cabinet was in 1997. If an election takes place late this year and there are no further changes, the current shadow cabinet would be marginally more experienced than the Conservatives in 2010. This would be an advantage.

Figure 8 **Years shadowing role held in cabinet/shadow cabinet, May 1997, May 2010 and January 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of IfG ministers database, House of Commons weekly information bulletin, and media reports. Notes: *Lord Strathclyde was shadow leader of the House of Lords for 11 and a half years. **Baroness Smith has been shadow leader of the House of Lords for eight and a half years. David Willetts’ time as shadow minister for innovation, universities and skills does not include his time before this as shadow secretary of state for education and skills.

There may be reasons why a new prime minister has to move personnel at the start of a premiership, but they should be conscious of the impact it will have on their ability to get up to speed quickly and consider other ways to mitigate this. They should prioritise greater continuity in the rest of the ministerial teams or provide the clearest possible objectives to the new office holders so they can brush up on what had been planned for the department.

The value of ministerial teams

Some of the factors least discussed in the appointment of ministers is their ability to work effectively as a team and whether a secretary of state is good at leading teams. According to many ministers interviewed by the Institute for Government, the functioning of the whole ministerial team is a major ingredient of success in government. Alan Duncan told us that “a good secretary of state will bring out the best in their ministers and enjoy their success. A poor one will be a control freak who tries to hog everything for themselves and in the end, they are resented, of course.”³

Some secretaries of state like Nicky Morgan say they focused on building a team: regular catch-ups, making sure each knew what others in the department were doing, creating a positive atmosphere.⁴ Poor teams usually saw ministers working in silos, with private offices left trying to make sure that the business of government was joined up – or, worse, the wider department left expending unnecessary energy and time trying to stave off arguments and battles for control.

Putting in place the foundations for good team working among ministers can be done from opposition. As above, this is partly about thinking carefully about the transition into government and making changes only where it is necessary. Opposition leaders can also set the tone for how they want teams to run in opposition that then is carried into government.

Clarity on junior ministerial portfolios

A final factor is clarity about portfolios. In opposition there will be more focus on the main policy priorities, or at least those that are most fundamental to the election campaign. In government, the portfolios in any department can be vast. Some prime ministers give very clear instructions about specific portfolios allocated to particular ministers, but in a lot of cases it is left to the secretary of state, or is just mapped on as a continuation of how the portfolio was handled previously; in the Foreign Office, for instance, ministerial portfolios are often assigned by region.

While opposition may not be the moment to fully allocate portfolios, it is a chance for shadow secretaries of state and the leadership to get a sense of the strengths and weaknesses of their ministerial teams and to prepare to support the transition of shadow junior ministers into government. This should include making sure that portfolios are clear and that junior ministers know what is expected of them. They are often referred to as the ‘workhorses of the department’,⁵ so more attention needs to be paid to how they can transition effectively into jobs in government. Shadow secretaries of state should work out how much they are willing to delegate to the rest of their ministerial team and the extent to which they will want to oversee the work of their colleagues.

2. Fully prepare shadows for the challenges of being a minister

An opposition waiting until it is in government to learn the ropes risks undermining the success of the transition. Former ministers almost always talk about what a shock it can be to find themselves in office without appreciating the scale of the change. Kitty Ussher, a former minister who served in DWP and HMT, called it an occasion in life “where you have a very abrupt change to everything all at the same time”.⁶

While opposition can be extremely busy, the biggest change for new ministers is both the scale of the operation that they now head up, and the number of decisions they are suddenly being asked to make. For Jacqui Smith, a former home secretary, it wasn't just the number and importance of decisions, but also “the speed with which decisions need to be taken”.⁷

Incoming ministers should not assume the civil service will provide a sufficient induction to prepare for this great shift. Officials can and do induct ministers but this will be more focused on what the civil service needs from ministers: departments prepare extensive first day briefings for them, they arrange meetings to introduce them to key teams or take them through key policies and problems facing the department. But this approach is not always best for new ministers, or for helping them get up to speed and get used to the job. As Ed Vaizey, former minister for culture, communications and creative industries, put it: “They don't teach you about government. I mean, I still have no idea what the Civil Service grades mean; they don't give you an organogram of the organisation that you're going into. They give you no tutoring at all on being a minister.”⁸

Shadow ministers should be allowed some time to focus on how they can be effective in the role: appreciating the expectations they will experience as a minister, preparing themselves for how they will best approach the job, and how they would develop themselves in the role.⁹

The expectations on ministers and the importance of understanding the role

One of the hardest adjustments new ministers must make, particularly secretaries of state, is the sheer scale of the job on a day-to-day basis. The demands will be enormous, even compared with what feels like a busy opposition. As Hugo Swire, a former Foreign Office minister, put it: “One minute you're not a minister, the next minute you've got people saying ‘Minister, sign this, sign that.’”¹⁰ Much that is out of their sight will still be their responsibility if it goes wrong – yet there is no time for micromanagement. Most crucial then is understanding the value that they add as ministers, and where to apply their effort.

For Lord Hunt, former minister at Defra, DECC and the Department of Health, it meant that “you've got to sort out where ministerial input would really make a difference and if you don't do it early, you just get overtaken by events. There is so much being thrown at you.”¹¹ Hugh Robertson, former minister of sport and the Olympics and later at the Foreign Office, said: “[An effective minister is] one who sets very clear aims and priorities and achieves them. You've got to be very, very clear about what you're trying to do. It's hopeless for civil servants if they don't know where the minister's coming from. It's almost the worst thing.”¹²

Ministers also need to understand the power they have over the people who work in government. It can be hard for new ministers to appreciate how much the department and civil servants, many of whom ministers will never actually meet, are waiting on their moves. Departments are trying to understand the person: how they work, what they care about, what annoys them. Small things – even where they sit in a room – can become huge signals to the department.

Understanding how to be effective in how you work

Shadow ministers also need to consider their own working style and the implications for how they best operate as a minister.

In Gerald Kaufman's 1980 book *How to Be a Minister*, he says: "You enter a world that, unless you are determined to break free of it, seals you in as securely and hermetically as if you were in a space capsule hurtling in orbit miles up in the sky."¹³ But there is still much they can do: from insisting on time in parliament, meetings of a particular length, submissions of a particular length, time between meetings to think about them, when they do the red box of that day's correspondence and decisions, who they want to speak to on any given issue.

Before 2010, some of those working on preparation for government for the Conservative Party wanted to understand the characteristics and working styles of the shadow team and what could be done to support them, even mooted the use of psychometric testing – an idea David Cameron shut down, fearing it might be picked up unfavourably by the media.

Some shadows will have a sense of their own preferences – the kinds of meetings they like, the rhythm of the day, how they manage who gets time in their diary, whether they prefer to talk problems through or think them through by reading and writing. Gregory Barker admits he was his own "own worst enemy in wanting to see people, wanting to discuss things face-to-face, having ideas and that generated activity".¹⁴ For civil servants, the biggest problem can be a minister who struggles to take decisions.

Given recent high-profile examples in the Conservative government, this must also include being conscious of which shadows may struggle to manage their own temperament when put under high stress. Recent investigations into accusations of bullying by ministers show how damaging the power imbalance can be for civil servants and the effectiveness of a department, something Institute for Government research has also found.¹⁵ Susan (now Baroness) Kramer, a former transport minister, said she was "conscious of some places where the ministers really couldn't get anything done because they just didn't treat people well".¹⁶

3. Plan for an effective No.10 team

One of the features of the UK government is that prime ministers have significant leeway in how they want to run No.10, at least organisationally. But there are also long-standing, physical constraints: the building and its warren of rooms limits how many people work there, and often determines the layout of where they work. The proximity of No.10 to the Cabinet Office – linked by an internal door – mirrors the blurred lines between the principle of cabinet government and the actual powers of the prime minister. The continuity of a system of private secretaries supporting the prime minister is now usually supplemented by a chief of staff, whose title might denote a focus on organisation but who can often be simply the most senior political adviser.

But there are few guides for new prime ministers on how to recruit, organise and manage the team of advisers who can often make or break their premiership. Some arrive expecting the management of business to be the remit of civil servants; others bring in an existing team already tested in opposition. But getting the people right in No.10 is fundamental. The place can easily reflect a court – with factions, patronage and battles for the ear of the prime minister dominating proceedings; when things go wrong it is often referred to as a 'bunker'.

Most of the focus around appointments in No.10 during a new premiership is on the key roles. A change of chief of staff here, a new director of comms there – it is so often about the characters of each individually, and rarely about how they work together as a team. But teamwork is often crucial to a functioning No.10. The place revolves around the prime minister – access to them, managing their time, getting decisions from them – and if the team around the PM do not work well together, things quickly fail. Turmoil in No.10 inevitably leads to turmoil in government generally and a failure to progress priorities. Building an effective team is therefore not just a case of which individuals to appoint, but also about how they will work together.

Making appointments to their No.10 team is usually something considered in advance of taking office. Blair was clear he wanted his opposition team – particularly key appointments like Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell and Anji Hunter – to transfer with him into government. But when leader of the opposition teams do transfer extant into government, it is still important they understand how that might change the rhythm of their ways of working: not all will have as instant access to the principal as they might have enjoyed in opposition and may find they need to compete with new, important voices.

Even when prime ministers have decided their team, it can still take time to get all the appointments into place – and this needs to be managed from opposition. Partly this is also about the clearance procedures and disclosures that need to be made for special advisers to be appointed, all done on a much tighter timeframe than in comparable nations. The former science minister David Willetts said: "Number 10 was incredibly hard to work out how to deal with because in the early days Number 10 kept on reorganising. If it was very serious you would text Ed Llewellyn."

In the UK, much more should be done, particularly in access talks between the leader of the opposition, their office and the cabinet secretary and Cabinet Office, to make plans for those appointments. The Cabinet Office should provide more guidance to opposition parties on this, to ensure that the vetting and onboarding process is streamlined and that there are no unnecessary delays to the appointment of advisers when a new government takes power.

4. Plan and prepare special adviser teams

If new ministers are poorly supported in preparing for and taking on the role, the position of special advisers (SpAds) is even worse. Most are recruited through opaque methods, often based on personal or political networks – links to the party or to the minister in question or through word of mouth. There have been improvements in how special advisers are supported pastorally with the introduction of a dedicated HR function, contracts, parental rights and other normal workforce expectations. But the job is still precarious, with long hours, little guidance on how to do the job well,* and little support beyond what special advisers organise for themselves.

Recruiting special advisers

For governments coming in from opposition, there is a greater likelihood that special advisers will have worked as advisers in opposition. All shadow secretaries of state have political advisers (PAdS), along with parliamentary assistants and constituency offices. More senior shadow ministers, like the shadow chancellor of the exchequer, will have many more political advisers. And some junior frontbench shadows – those who would in theory take up junior ministerial roles in government – also have at least one adviser. This is different to government where, for the most part, only secretaries of state will have special advisers, and sometimes only two.

This means that it is likely some political advisers will not transfer to equivalent roles in government – leaving some new ministers without the people they relied on most when they were preparing for the job. In addition to this, all SpAd appointments must be signed off by the prime minister, meaning others might also end up with entirely new special advisers, or theoretically have 'their people' vetoed. Boris Johnson and his team fired several other ministers' advisers from No.10.¹⁷

Preparing special advisers

The role of special adviser is also different in some fundamental ways from being a political adviser in opposition. In opposition it can be demanding because there is so little other resource: they are supporting their principals on everything from responding to government actions, putting down questions in parliament, developing relationships with stakeholders and outside groups, to developing policy almost on their own. In government the job is even more demanding, but it is largely the department that is making the demands. Special advisers will, mostly, no longer be conducting any research, developing any policy or producing work for their

* The Institute for Government is publishing a series of guides for SpAds on aspects of the role.

principal – they will instead be overseeing, reviewing, shaping and framing the output of the civil service. This means it is important to make sure advisers are as ready to enter government as ministers.

Prioritisation and focus are critically important to a special adviser. The vague job description means they can insert themselves into any part of a department's work and have limitless demands on their time. The civil service will not know, initially, how they want to work – a cautious private office dealing with a new minister may, for example, want special adviser clearance before they do almost anything.

Finding the happy medium between not reading or reviewing every document they can, while also guarding against unwelcome surprises, is difficult. So too is working out what meetings to attend, what papers to insist on reading, where to prioritise their attentions and where to draw the line.¹⁸ The civil service can support special advisers in how best to use their time: as Sonia Khan, former SpAd to Sajid Javid, told an Institute for Government event that “the best special advisers really utilise their private offices” to manage their workload and identify how they can be most effective in government.¹⁹ But working through where special advisers should focus their time in advance of day one will help with a smooth transition.

There is also getting to know government while in opposition. Opposition party leaderships can and should plan to prepare and train the full adviser cohort: covering private offices and how they work, the submission process, the code of conduct, as well as ways of working in Whitehall – public finances, devolution and policy making processes. If possible, this should also include supporting familiarity with the key figures in the department, key existing policies and programmes. Advisers need to be supported to understand the volume of work and number and speed of decisions that government will require from them.

Behaviour or mindset is part of this preparation too. It is easy to feel that the secretary of state's private office is the 'command and control' centre of the department. But special advisers should be mindful of how they use the power of the minister that is vested in them. It is fine to push and have high standards, or be firm when something has not happened, but they need to recognise when officials are all working hard too. “In the end... it always works if the relationships are good, and that's the relationships between the politicians and the SpAds, and the relationships between the civil service and the SpAds”, as Baroness (Sally) Morgan, former director of government relations for Tony Blair, told the Institute.²⁰

The context for Labour in 2024

Keir Starmer shuffled his team in September 2023; frontbench resignations in November then required further appointments. These should be the last major changes before the election. The biggest challenge for Labour will be resisting major moves among the team in government formation. The focus now should be on prioritising continuity and encouraging shadow teams to prepare for their brief.

Starmer will also need to decide how he wants to set up No.10. Should he enter government in 2024–25 he should not just accept the existing structure of No.10 and try to work within it. Many of the changes in recent years were forged amid existential risks to the government, rather than a reflection of a systematic approach to improving the capacity and capability of the centre. A change in government is an opportunity for a more significant review of how No.10 is structured, including how it works with the Cabinet Office and the Treasury.

But whatever wider changes take place, establishing the roles and responsibilities for the most senior advisers around the prime minister will be critical. This needs to be a team that has the right blend of skills and perspectives to provide rounded advice. There can be a temptation to see jobs in No.10 as a reward to those who have been most instrumental in helping the prime minister to get their job, but the focus should be – first and foremost – on building a team that can help them deliver over a parliament.

The party will also need to appoint a much bigger number of special advisers than when it was last in government. Tony Blair recruited between 70 and 84 advisers across government, and Gordon Brown around 74. Today, more ministers have more SpAds – in March 2023 there were 117 in government (although many of the additions are in No.10).²¹ Despite the rule that cabinet ministers can only appoint two SpAds, most secretaries of state – including the chancellor, foreign secretary, home secretary and chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster – had more than this when we collected this data.²²

But the advisers also need to be appointed swiftly. As well as deciding in advance who they are taking into government, the opposition would also need to work with the Cabinet Office to streamline appointments. The opposition should seek advice from the Cabinet Office in how to start this process sooner.

Key takeaways:

- **There should not be another shadow reshuffle before the general election. Continuity in personnel during any transition will help teams settle**, particularly in major policy portfolios. Also consider the **likely portfolios of junior ministers** and how these will match up with the demands within the department.
- **The leader of the opposition and the chief of staff should use the access talks to agree how they want to restructure the centre of government for day one**, including the people and capabilities needed for No.10.
- Labour should have identified its **list of planned core special adviser appointments** prior to concluding access talks discussions with the Cabinet Office. These should undergo vetting in advance of election day.

Conclusion

There will be a general election in 2024. Given the speed with which transfers of power happen in the UK system, this makes this final year a critical period in which an opposition party must prepare for the possibility of entering government. Because should this happen, it will happen overnight.

The message from our research is clear: thorough, detailed preparation in this final period makes for more effective government and makes it easier, and usually faster, to implement reform. Here the current opposition, Keir Starmer's Labour Party, has advantages – as well as disadvantages – as it heads into this final period.

The party boasts a relatively experienced shadow cabinet, certainly compared with 1997, when no Labour shadow cabinet member had run a department at secretary of state level, as three of the current team have. But access talks are overdue. These normally begin some 16 months prior to the latest possible election date, but are yet to start. And if the polls are correct and the vote does return a Labour government, Starmer's party stands to inherit a system that has been under considerable strain in recent years, and a fiscal outlook that presents a very serious challenge.

Labour has talked openly about the fact that its preparation is well under way, and it is clear it is making progress on key issues like policy review. There is more to do, and it should stay focused on preparation even as pressures mount to look elsewhere. Access talks should be authorised and begin as soon as possible, missions and the policies beneath them must be marshalled into a coherent set of core priorities. There is still time for this work – but it must be done now.

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