

THE OTTAWA REPORT

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OPINION



Shadow Cabinets of the NDP and the Conservatives: What do they mean for the 38th Parliament?

On 20 July 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin unveiled a new cabinet to Canadians. In early August the NDP and Conservatives appointed their shadow cabinets within each respective federal portfolio.

In majority governments, government relations activities focus on the executive branch of government – Ministers, staff and senior officials in the bureaucracy. However, in a minority government, as strategic control shifts in part from the executive to the legislative branch of government, politicians of all stripes have a greater say in the direction and shape of legislation and government programs and policies.

In this context, shadow cabinet appointments are more relevant and important targets for advocacy efforts, and offer some indication of what the 38th Parliament might look like.

This article provides a broad overview of the choices the NDP and the Conservatives have made in their respective shadow cabinets and what they might suggest in terms of how things might unfold from a transport and related policy perspective in the upcoming Parliament. The Bloc Québécois has not named their shadow cabinet yet and is not expected to do so in the very near term. We also delve deeper into the individual personalities in areas of key interest such as transport and infrastructure.

The Opposition Parties in Parliament

Each party will have a strategic place in the upcoming Parliament. The NDP holds a position of special influence with the Liberals and some might say it has been a significant influence in shaping the government's priorities. Many of the issues that the NDP have identified as priorities – health care, the environment, and families – were key planks in the Liberal election platform. From this perspective, we could expect to see a more innovative and activist government at work over the next 18-24 months.

The Bloc Québécois is also a strategic player in the next Parliament. With the Liberal-NDP union one vote shy of a majority, the government will have to rely on left-leaning MPs from the Bloc to support the government on key initiatives.

As the official Opposition with 99 seats, and with many of them first-time members from Ontario, the Conservatives will also be an important government relations audience in a minority situation. The Conservatives are in a pivotal position to determine the momentum of key files - to either slow things down or expedite them, depending on the issue. It is also worth noting that the Bloc and the Conservatives together total 153, only two votes shy of a majority.

In terms of government relations, particularly advocacy, it will be very important to educate all political parties and to determine individual party positions on issues. Gaining a better understanding of the critics in each party will be helpful.

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Ministries of Transport, Infrastructure, Urban Affairs

Transport – Conservative Critic

The Conservatives' new Transport critic is MP Rob Nicholson (Niagara Falls, Ontario), who served in the House of Commons between 1984 and 1993, the year he was appointed the Minister of Science and Minister Responsible for Small Business. His background will be beneficial in this largely economic portfolio, although he may lack the knowledge of the file of his predecessor.

Transport – NDP Critic

Well versed in the transportation agenda by virtue of being a long-standing member of the Standing Committee on Transport, MP Bev Desjarlais (Churchill, Manitoba) is a strong advocate of the government playing a significant role in the transportation network to ensure service to all parts of Canada. Active in the labour movement, Desjarlais will be a strong critic particularly when it comes to any further government funding decisions for Air Canada and VIA Rail.

Infrastructure – Conservative Critic

Elected to the House in 1997 under the Alliance banner, MP Rahim Jaffer (Edmonton—Strathcona) has a relatively high profile earned as one of the youngest MPs on the Hill. Sitting on numerous Committees, Jaffer has served as Intergovernmental Affairs, Industry and the Environment critic for the Alliance party. He is now the Conservatives' Infrastructure critic.

The Conservative campaign platform called for an elimination of many of the federally managed infrastructure programs in favour of allocating a portion of the gas tax to municipalities to manage these initiatives on their own behalf.

Cities and Community Infrastructure – NDP Critic

A former MPP for Hamilton, new MP David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre) is the NDP's Cities and Community Infrastructure critic. He has a long history in municipal and provincial affairs – a good fit with this critic position. Serving as the Solicitor-General in Bob Rae's Ontario government, Christopherson subsequently held positions as Party Whip and Speaker.

The NDP have an aggressive cities and community policy platform, and with Christopherson's experience, there is no doubt he will vie for plenty of airtime over the coming months.