

Plibersek moves to high profile education job in ALP reshuffle

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Labor's deputy leader Tanya Plibersek is to take the frontline shadow ministry of education, including both schools and higher education, in Bill Shorten's reshuffle announced on Saturday.

Many in Labor have been anxious for the popular Plibersek to switch from foreign affairs to a major domestic job, where she can do more of the policy heavy lifting and use her constant access to the media to maximum advantage.

Plibersek picks up schools from Kate Ellis and higher education from Kim Carr - who on Friday, thanks to Shorten's protection, successfully resisted a concerted move by the left to dump him to the backbench.

Plibersek's shadow ministry is being described as a new "super portfolio" because Labor had previously separated schools and higher education. The education minister, Simon Birmingham, has both.

Higher education is set to become a controversial area again this term as the government struggles to get a policy together after the debacle of its 2014 budget plan to deregulate university fees.

Ellis will be shadow minister for early childhood education and development, and shadow minister for TAFE and vocational education. She previously had early childhood and picks up the vocational area from Sharon Bird, who is no longer in the shadow ministry. Ellis stays in shadow cabinet.

Shorten will keep small business in shadow cabinet, playing up the contrast with Malcolm Turnbull who in his reshuffle this week took the portfolio from Kelly O'Dwyer and dropped it to the outer ministry, where it is now held by the Nationals Michael McCormack.

Education, especially schools policy, was at the centre of Labor's election campaign, together with health.

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Shorten in a statement said he was “determined to keep the issues important to Australians at the top of our agenda – better schools and education, Australian jobs and protecting Medicare.

“We’re not going to take a backward step fighting for these things. There are few issues as critical to our nation’s future prosperity than education – which is why I am giving it such priority”.

He said the appointment of Plibersek was “about putting a great policy thinker on the political frontline”.

Caucus elected the shadow ministry after the factions put forward their tickets. Shorten allocates portfolios.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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