

Mrs Thatcher as Shadow Chancellor

by NORA BELOFF, our Political Correspondent

MRS Margaret Thatcher will become Shadow Chancellor this week in Mr Heath's reshuffle of the Opposition Front Bench. She is already briefing herself to confront Mr Denis Healey when he unveils his crisis Budget on Tuesday week.

This will be by far the highest position a woman has ever occupied on either Front Bench. No women have ever been given any of the traditional high offices of State—Prime Minister, Chancellor, Foreign or Home Secretary—or their Opposition equivalents.

Forty-nine year-old Mrs Thatcher, who was Education Minister in the last Conservative Government, has been serving in the Opposition as Shadow Environment Secretary. She will take over the Shadow Chancellorship from Mr Robert Carr, whose stock in the party declined when he moved into the field of finance.

Mrs Thatcher faces a formidable task. In Commons debates she will have to deal with the whole complex question of finance and taxation. Mr Healey and his junior Ministers have the entire Treasury apparatus behind them. Mrs Thatcher will get no Civil Service assistance and will have to rely on the Tory Central Office research department.

In the long discussions and arguments on the Finance Bill, which will implement Mr Healey's Budget, she will head a team of Tory MPs—all men—who specialise in finance. If she succeeds and the Tories are returned to office she could well be the first woman Chancellor.

As for his own position, Mr Heath has decided that he cannot survive as leader without announcing new elections for the party leadership. This will probably be done within the next fortnight, probably at the 1922 Committee meeting on 14 November.

It was back-benchers' reactions at

last Thursday's meeting of the committee which convinced him that an election was inevitable. He has not yet decided when it should be held. It is unlikely to be before the Easter recess, but it will certainly be within a year.

There is a general feeling among Tory MPs against an immediate election. All Mr Heath's Shadow Cabinet colleagues, with the possible exception of Sir Keith Joseph, have assured him they would not stand against him in a snap poll. So if he called an election now, he might be thought to be preventing a free choice, and if he won his position would not be improved.

Mr Heath's weak position as party leader has given him more trouble than he expected in reshuffling his Shadow Cabinet.

Some candidates are hesitating about whether they want to commit their future to a man who may never again be Prime Minister. He hoped to have his new list ready for

last week's debate on the Queen's Speech, but by yesterday evening the appointments were not complete. The new names are now expected to be announced tomorrow or on Tuesday.

Although he is being demoted, Mr Carr, one of Mr Heath's most loyal supporters, is not one of those creating difficulties. He has apparently agreed to shadow another home department, possibly social security.

Mr Heath is anxious to uphold moderate non-doctrinaire views, but he privately acknowledges the hankering many Tory back-benchers have for a more positive Tory policy.

Mrs Thatcher's promotion and Mr John Peyton's return to the front bench as Leader of the House are moves in this direction. Sir Keith Joseph is being invited to remain Shadow Home Secretary, a post in which he will be encouraged to develop his controversial views on self-discipline and respect for the Tory values of family and tradition.

The traditionalists are likely to do well at the expense of those known in the party as the 'technocrats,' notably former Environment Secretary, Mr Peter Walker, who was behind the last Conservative Government's commitment to economic growth.

Mr Walker, who is currently shadowing defence, and in terms of the present hierarchy could have thought of himself as potential Shadow Foreign Secretary, will warn in a speech today that if the party swings to the right it risks following the example of the Scandinavian Conservatives and becoming a permanent minority.

Mr Heath is anxious to bring new men into the Shadow Cabinet, including some of his critics. There are reports that he would like to bury the hatchet with former Party Chairman Edward Heath and give him a Shadow portfolio.



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