

How to appoint a cabinet



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Introduction: the problem with reshuffles

A special adviser once remarked to me, at the start of a reshuffle, that anyone who tells you that they know the outcome of the reshuffle is lying. He added that the only question was whether they were lying to themselves, or to you. In truth no one knows what will happen on reshuffle day, not even the prime minister. And that is absurd.

The prime minister knows who their first choices are for each job, but they have no idea whether they will accept. Iain Duncan Smith did not accept David Cameron's invitation to become home secretary. Justine Greening did not accept Theresa May's request that she become secretary of state for work and pensions. It only takes one refusal to derail a reshuffle. Refusals always leak, making the prime minister look weak and undermining as 'second choice' the person who is subsequently given a role.

That is not the only problem with the way UK governments conduct reshuffles. We also end up with people in positions that just don't suit them. Sometimes they simply have no interest in the role. Any civil servant will tell you that they have worked for ministers whose heart was clearly not in it. And in many cases their lacklustre performance comes as a surprise because the civil service jungle drums say that the very same minister was hugely effective in another role. Chris Mullin records in his diary how Tony Blair shunted him around, like a piece on a chess board, with no real feeling for his interests, expertise or effectiveness.

Nor is this problem confined to junior ministers. I have seen secretaries of state appointed who are not only uninterested in their new portfolio but whose views on it even stand in opposition to those of their party leader. In my time in government Justine Greening seemed particularly unlucky. She was a staunch opponent of expanding Heathrow airport, both from conviction and her commitment to her constituents in nearby Putney. Despite that, she was appointed transport secretary by David Cameron in a period in which he was trying to rehabilitate the idea of a third runway. It was an absurd appointment.

Greening was an equally staunch opponent of grammar schools, based on her own experience and her reading of the evidence base. Prime Minister Theresa May had a different view, favouring the return of grammar schools. Despite this obvious clash, May appointed Greening as education secretary. Again, the appointment was absurd.

Finally, I have seen incoherent ministerial teams within a department. In one case a minister of state was fairly open with civil servants that they felt they could do a better job than the secretary of state. We always got the feeling that the minister of state didn't think that the secretary of state should be in the cabinet at all. The secretary of state, in turn, felt that the minister of state had little to offer in the formation of policy.

Equally I have also seen secretaries of state who did not involve their junior ministers to the fullest extent possible. There are many plausible reasons, but the result is always to weaken the ministerial team in a way that is not necessary.

None of this makes for good government, and old hands in the civil service tell me that what I have seen is true across all administrations.

In no other profession does the boss publicly offer a member of staff a job, without any form of application, and then asks in a very public way whether they would take it. It makes no sense for the prime minister to do this. Similarly, most manager-level employees get to pick their own team, in their areas, as and when vacancies arise. The idea that a chief executive would be selecting more than 100 staff in their organisation is bizarre.

What follows is my proposal for a better way to conduct reshuffles, to bring order to the all too common chaos, and which I believe would lead to more effective cabinet government.

A better way to staff the cabinet

There are three types of reshuffle. The first occurs when a new leader takes office, the second is a major reshuffle, and the third is a minor reshuffle caused by a minister leaving office (for whatever reason). It goes without saying that effective government is usually best served by having as few major reshuffles as possible. A cabinet in which ministers understand their briefs and have strategies to achieve their objectives – for which longer time spent in the same role will help – leads to more effective government. The following proposal applies only to the first two types of reshuffle, as the third often requires a much more targeted approach.

The prime minister should announce that there will be a reshuffle. All MPs of the governing party would be asked which jobs they would accept. Some would decline to serve at all. There are members of parliament who prefer to be a backbencher, or who disagree with the direction that the party leader has set. Some would have family or other personal reasons not to want to serve.

Others would select a specific job, or department. I can well imagine that Nick Gibb would volunteer for any role in the Department for Education but for few, if any, other roles. Iain Duncan Smith's insistence on remaining in the Department for Work and Pensions might be one example. And a few might choose to play a high stakes game, saying they would take only one particular job – not because they care more about it, but because they are grand enough to think everything else is beneath them. In other words, "chancellor or bust".

Having spent a lot of time around ministers in the last decade or so, I am convinced that most would volunteer to do any role they were offered. There are many young (and not so young) ambitious types out there desperate for a cabinet role of any distinction, and desperate to show themselves as willing and reliable. This applies not just to newbies. Michael Gove, already an accomplished and impressive minister, made it clear that he did not expect a job from Theresa May, but would support her loyally from the backbenches. He did just that, before taking on what is often regarded as the lowest cabinet position, as secretary of state at Defra. It is easy to imagine him ticking if not every box, then a lot of them.

As well as ticking the jobs they would take, MPs would also be invited to set out what they would seek to do in a handful of roles in which they are particularly interested. In education, Michael Gove could have written about free schools and academies, while Gavin Williamson and Gillian Keegan would have put much greater emphasis on further education. Justine Greening could have put on record her opposition to expanding Heathrow, or grammar schools. These letters would not, of course, be made public – they would be for the prime minister’s eyes only. Equally, ministers could set out a general approach. Matt Hancock and Steve Barclay, for example, could write about their emphasis on data, while Liz Truss would note her commitment to freedom and market liberalisation. Some would simply offer to be a safe and reliable pair of hands, in an area in which they felt that was what was needed.

The prime minister could then select their cabinet, safe in the knowledge that the people chosen would accept. They could ensure that the cabinet was balanced in all the ways they think important – satisfying the different wings of the party, ensuring diversity, and so on. But above all, they could appoint people who are enthusiastic about particular jobs and about policies and directions that the prime minister supports. Now of course, many will profess a sudden love for deregulation during a Liz Truss premiership, or freeports under Rishi Sunak. But Justine Greening would never have claimed to support Heathrow expansion or grammar schools: we would get more coherent government.

Better reshuffles would also lead to fewer reshuffles. Appointing people who are interested in certain ministries to those ministries, and choosing people whose plans align with those of the prime minister, will make it less likely that the prime minister will feel the need to rearrange their cabinet as each parliament progresses.

In theory, of course, the big beasts could collude – I will be the chancellor, you the foreign secretary, they will be defence and so on. But that seems unlikely – there would be an incentive for almost everyone to defect from the agreement and offer to do another job, or any job.

And of course, the prime minister can still appoint whomever they like. In the unlikely event that no one they want to take a particular role volunteers for it, then they induce further applicants. A choice word from a special adviser – perhaps commenting to a relatively new MP that it is important for relatively new MPs to put themselves forward, what do they have to lose – might do the trick.

Getting new ministers around the table

The prime minister would then select their cabinet. In many cases the people will know their role – they will have been promised it in advance. In other cases the prime minister could ring them briefly as a courtesy, to let them know the outcome. Unlike at present, this would not be an *offer* of a job, but the formal acceptance of it. To decline – having said only two days before that you would take the job – would be to resign.

The newly appointed people would be invited to attend cabinet. They would sit around the cabinet table, and each would be invited to open an envelope. The envelope would tell them the role that they had been appointed to – which all, or almost all, would know already – and the items that the prime minister expects them to achieve. That list would draw on what they had said, but it might well include other issues the prime minister believes to be important, as well as excluding some ideas the minister suggested that the prime minister did not share. It is, after all, usual for the boss to give you some objectives and there is no reason cabinet ministers should be different.

The prime minister would then explain to all present what the aims of the government are, why each colleague has been chosen for that role, and what has been asked of each colleague. Imagine Suella Braverman writes that she wishes to be home secretary because of her belief in and commitment to making the processing of illegal immigrants in Rwanda a reality. Imagine now that the prime minister says in front of the rest of the cabinet that he has appointed her for exactly that reason. Her authority is strengthened – and by extension his, because he is demonstrating a unity in his party and in his government.

Notice that this is quite unlike how we appoint ministers at present. The prime minister calls someone in and tells them that they have 'got' transport. They then depart for the relevant department, to be met at the door by their permanent secretary, and their principal private secretary. It is all very 'Yes, Minister'. What it lacks is a sense of government cohesion – as soon as you are allocated a department, you disappear off to it. Better – I think – to strengthen the government's core purpose and unity by having the cabinet meet immediately. Better for the prime minister to explain to the cabinet the rationale and purpose of this stage of their government. Better for the cabinet to be locked in – insofar as that can be done – to that common purpose.

Maintaining stability

The promise of a reshuffle can destabilise a government and so it is important that these things are done quickly. The prime minister should inform people one lunchtime that the reshuffle is coming and give them 1–2 days to say what roles they would be willing to take, and what they would do in those roles. In my experience ministers and putative ministers know the roles they would be willing to take, and what they would do if given the role they really want. There is no need to give them a particularly long time to make their case.

The prime minister would make their decision within a day, meaning that the cabinet meeting in which the new ministers come together for the first time would take place 2–3 days after the announcement. We like things to happen quickly in this country and nothing here prevents that tradition continuing.

As ever on reshuffle day there are the disappointed. In some cases, those people will have ticked the box that says 'I will do any job you like, prime minister', and they will just have to accept that the prime minister chose other people. But in other cases, the disappointed will have to accept that their fussiness may well have cost them a place at the cabinet table, or a place in government at all. If you tick only 'Chancellor', well, the prime minister can let it be known how disappointed they were at that choice. The prime minister would have loved to have had them around the table (without being specific as to where, no need to undermine the cabinet member appointed) but they brought it upon themselves.

A day after the announcement, cabinet ministers would be asked who they wanted in their teams, and why, and whether there are any people they really don't want, and why. The prime minister would not be bound to accept their recommendations and would rarely do so in full. A prime minister, after all, may well want to ensure a degree of ideological balance within a particular department. But a sensible prime minister should listen to a cabinet minister who says "I work well with this person", or "I have noticed this person's potential", and certainly to someone who says "Please no, not them".

The junior ministers would then be announced a few days later, again collectively. They can all gather in a single room to learn their new roles. Again, the prime minister should want to create a sense of unity of purpose in government. As it is, the junior ministerial appointments dribble out in a way that does no one any favours.

It would be particularly appropriate in a post-leadership change situation. We have a problem now as to what to do with vanquished candidates and former leaders. Some may never be willing to serve under another leader, but it is worth considering whether former prime ministers – many of whom have significant talents – should be serving in cabinet again. This system would allow losing candidates and vanquished leaders to offer themselves for particular posts. Willie Whitelaw was runner-up to Margaret Thatcher and served her in an exemplary fashion. By contrast Rishi Sunak could not have continued as chancellor after Liz Truss replaced Boris Johnson, but would he have been willing to serve in any role? If he had been willing to take a role, the Truss government would have been stronger for his doing so. Of course, Truss could have offered him a role, but a rejection would have been plausible, and very visible. So under the current system it is better not to take that risk, and good people can be left out.

Conclusion

The way UK governments conduct reshuffles currently is destabilising, slap-dash and all too often chaotic. This does not serve the prime minister, the civil servants working in ever-changing departments, or ultimately the public they serve well. The proposal outlined in this paper would bring a sense of order to the chaos, and help prime ministers staff their cabinet in a considered, cohesive way.

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