



Reshuffle at last

What does Boris Johnson's new cabinet mean for government?

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Introduction

At last, after months of rumours, Boris Johnson has reshuffled his cabinet to remove some of the most criticised ministers and elevate his allies. In public terms, it may prove underwhelming. He has indeed demoted or sacked the prime targets of public fury and derision – Dominic Raab and Gavin Williamson – but after much delay. That may have stemmed from a reluctance to be told what to do by public clamour. But even though he has broadly chosen to reward competence and penalise failure, he has paid a price in the perception that he would tolerate incompetence for long stretches. The reshuffle also suggests he has put popularity with the Conservative Party first – hence the jettisoning of Robert Buckland, thought to have done well at the Ministry of Justice but lacking much love from members.

What is more, the reshuffle does not obviously advance the priorities of the government – indeed, hinders some of them. The budget and spending review on 27 October are not helped by moving a key Treasury minister although the chancellor stays in place. Civil service reform, a cause to which the government claimed to be wedded, is almost certainly weakened with the moving of Michael Gove. And the standing of foreign policy and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office within the government is in question not so much because of Liz Truss's arrival there – she did a competent job in International Trade – but because of the way the Afghanistan exit showed how its Whitehall clout had diminished.

This short paper looks at some of the main casualties of Boris Johnson's reshuffle, and at some of the key questions it poses.

The casualties

The budget and spending review

Rishi Sunak stays as chancellor; the wilder speculation that the prime minister's sense of rivalry – and a clash of views about fiscal prudence – would lead Johnson to move him proved empty. But the review will not have been helped by the removal of Steve Barclay from chief secretary to the Treasury to Michael Gove's previous post as chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and minister for the Cabinet Office.

Coming just weeks before the review is completed, Johnson's delay to the reshuffle also means departmental spending plans are all already filed with the Treasury, leaving newly appointed secretaries of state with little room for manoeuvre as they open their departments' books for the first time. Key talks between the Treasury and departments are still to take place, however, so new cabinet ministers will need to get on top of their briefs quickly, especially in those departments – like Education – that have also lost experienced junior ministers.

Civil service reform

The government has moved a long way from making civil service reform a top priority and Gove's move confirms this. Architect of the [Declaration on Government Reform](#) published in June, he is an energetic minister who knows how to use the levers of power, and while he held the civil service brief changes seemed likely to happen. Barclay, as the new minister for the Cabinet Office, should aim to do more than just implement what was anyway a fairly modest set of reforms. As well as helping broker policy for the prime minister Barclay should pick a few priorities to push from the centre – giving ministerial leadership to ambitious government reform should be one of them.

The status of foreign policy within the government

Liz Truss's popularity within the party all but guaranteed her a strong role after this reshuffle. She is thought within the government to have performed well at the Department of International Trade, extracting a growing pile of trade deals from the uncertainties of the post-Brexit world. She will have a feel for her new job from that. All the same, her distinctive, outspoken brand of Conservative ideology will bring its own tone to the Foreign Office and perhaps to foreign policy.

The big question is how her positions on China, of which she has been critical, and on the US, of which she is an admirer, translate into government policy. She may prioritise the latter first, with relations with Washington left jagged after the abruptness of the US-led exit from Afghanistan. What that episode showed, however, was how much the strength of the UK–US relationship has dwindled – and how much the Foreign Office has dwindled within Whitehall. It did not have the contacts with Afghanistan's neighbours or did not use them well to help the UK's cause during the exit. The Ministry of Defence emerged better from the chaotic and bitter withdrawal.

The key questions

Will Michael Gove make 'levelling up' and the Union the heart of his new role?

From one perspective, Gove's move to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) is a demotion, taking on a department that has not been high profile except when housing plans erupt in rows. But he was known to be restless in his role as minister for the Cabinet Office, left without enough substantial work to do once post-Brexit talks were given to Lord (David) Frost. He will bring heft and a huge command of detail to his new department as he has to previous jobs at Defra and the Ministry of Justice.

He could in effect use the department as a vehicle to advance the government's priority of 'levelling up', while he retains promotion of the Union, one of the other great causes the government is championing. In that case, unglamorous as this move might seem, he could command two of the government's big themes with a new platform to unite them and set out the government's vision for the entire UK. His success will be central to the government's re-election campaign.

Can Nadhim Zahawi rescue the Department for Education?

Zahawi, formerly vaccines minister, is one of the big winners of the reshuffle, a reward for a steady and intelligent performance in a role whose success reflected many reasons beyond his control but also his judgement. His arrival in the cabinet brings the number of ethnic minority members to seven, allowing Johnson to describe it as the most diverse ever. But he inherits from the much-pilloried Gavin Williamson some headaches: [grade inflation in schools](#), need for remedial teaching after the pandemic, a widening gap between more and less advantaged students, rows over university admissions and lack of in person teaching and more.

Is deputy prime minister really a job?

Giving the title to Dominic Raab as part-consolation for his demotion (as it essentially is) from the Foreign Office does not turn him into the prime minister's full-time deputy. The title has been in abeyance since Nick Clegg left office in 2015, though first secretaries of state have acted as de facto deputies (as Raab himself did when Johnson was in hospital with Covid) or as prime ministerial 'fixers'. But Johnson does not seem to have an obvious need, or even liking, for someone doing such a job, and reports that Raab was sore at losing FCDO suggest the title is more of a signal of confidence about his continuing role in government.

Women have prospered

Not only has Liz Truss been promoted to foreign secretary but Priti Patel has remained as home secretary, despite months of increasing numbers of immigrants arriving across the Channel. Patel has sustained a barrage of criticism – from within the government for failing to stem the flow and from Labour and human rights groups for her proposed answers. But both Patel and Truss are very popular within the Conservative Party, and it appears that Johnson has put this above the criticism. The promotion of Anne-Marie Trevelyan and Nadine Dorries leaves the cabinet with a slightly higher proportion of women – and in more senior roles.

Dorries, however, is a gamble at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Her appointment to what was already a controversial brief under Oliver Dowden will be seen as a doubling down on the 'culture wars' and of the government seeking greater political control over key bodies such as OfCom and the BBC (she has been critical of the broadcaster and of its funding by licence fee). As at health, however, she may prove more pragmatic in post than when commentating from the back benches.

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