



10 ways for Boris Johnson to reset his government

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Summary

“Reset” is the word of the moment. The prime minister is planning a slate of announcements which, in their green commitment and pledge to “level up” the country, go a long way to retrieve the ambition of the manifesto that won him an 80-seat majority less than a year ago. With Brexit talks reaching a climax (even if its nature is still uncertain), a new president in the US and announcements on vaccines heralding the beginning of the end of the devastation caused by the coronavirus pandemic, Boris Johnson has the help of external events to consolidate that sense of change. Here’s how to make the period *After Dominic* more successful than the last 10 months.

1. Make rapid changes to Number 10 and refresh the ministerial team

The most obvious step for Johnson is to sort out his Number 10 operation. The next few weeks will be rocky as the fallout from the Cummings and Lee Cain departures continues. There may be more resignations, and advisers in Downing Street will be testing the limits of the new regime. Johnson needs a [new chief of staff fast](#),¹ someone who can exercise the prime minister's full authority and impose discipline on the political operation in the centre of government. A reorganisation to promote competent loyalists who can resist the temptation to brief the media would not go amiss.

Then, in the new year, a cabinet reshuffle would unpick another Cummings-era mistake, of prizing loyalty to a particular form of Brexit above all else. Johnson can now make clear that the price of entry to a ministerial job is effectiveness, skill and willingness to – in private – test and challenge decisions instead of nodding them through. There is no need to move ministers for the sake of it, let alone disrupt Whitehall with [further costly departmental restructures](#),² but rewarding competence and promoting talent will pay political and practical dividends.

2. Add substance to policies

The government's 2019 election policy programme retains a clear sense of direction focusing on Brexit, "levelling up", making progress on net zero and funding for infrastructure and public services. The prime minister says he is passionately committed to these ambitious plans which have a good deal of public support and could – if realised – be a real record of achievement. Coronavirus understandably knocked the just-elected government off course, but ministers now need to explain how they will deliver their pledges.

That relations with the European Union are still unclear – just months from the end of the transition period – barely needs saying except that it is so remarkable. On net zero, with the climate change summit which Johnson will host just a year away, it is time to explain how the UK itself intends to [meet those targets and confront difficult choices](#).³ Talk of advancing curbs on petrol and diesel car sales is a start; there needs to be much more.

3. Make clear the UK's ambitions in the world

The 2021 UK presidency of the G7 offers a further big chance to put more substance on commitments, national and global, and to explain better than the government has yet done what it means by "Global Britain". Its intentions for foreign, defence, security and aid policy will be scrutinised, against a backdrop of a world still reeling from coronavirus. But this is also a chance for Johnson to paint a big picture, as he loves to do – and back it up with commitments. If the end of the Brexit transition has been a shambles, bringing a hit to the economy on top of coronavirus, that will enormously weaken Johnson's standing – and the UK's.

4. Resolve contradictions in economic policy

The government emerges from the first shock of coronavirus with a contradiction in economic tendencies within the cabinet and a lack of clarity about the future – and what it is to be a Conservative leader in the time of coronavirus. Repeated needs to keep propping up jobs have undermined the chancellor’s attempts to use government support to help rebalance the economy, but hard choices will need to begin at some point and will need more coherent explanation to people and reassurance – and to the devolved administrations – than the government has yet managed.

Ministers, who are pledging at the moment to rip up old rules directing where public investment goes to enable them to invest in struggling areas of the UK need to explain what new rules will guide them, if there is not to be a suspicion that they are funnelling money towards constituencies where they need future votes, or where money would be wasted rather than support places that have the best chance of thriving.

5. Set a calmer, more authoritative tone

The prime minister needs to change his government’s tone, process and style. Previous prime ministers have turned things around, such as Margaret Thatcher halfway through her first term when she asserted herself over the economic “wets” in her cabinet. Johnson has done this before, too, having reinvented himself early on in his London mayoralty.

Politics is a rough sport, and prime ministers sometimes need to take out the hatchet (or more often to licence their advisers to do their dirty work). But this government has often harmed itself with its tone. In resisting Keir Starmer’s call for a “circuit breaker” lockdown, Johnson criticised the leader of the opposition for wanting to “turn the lights out”, while knowing that, within days, he might implement similar plans. In [rejecting Marcus Rashford’s campaign on school meals](#)⁴ and in the summer exams debacle, the government mounted an aggressive defence of an unsustainable position, and then made an inelegant U-turn.

There are major policy battles ahead, the most immediate over a Brexit deal for the end of the transition period in a few weeks’ time, with the final outcome of talks, be it deal or no deal, requiring deft manoeuvring rather than aggressive posturing, to [keep Tory backbenchers on side](#).⁵ And there are plenty of other issues waiting to cause trouble, both domestically, including the extent and imposition of coronavirus lockdowns, and in foreign affairs, such as the government’s approach to China.

The prime minister’s description of Scottish devolution as “a disaster”, handing a gift to his Scottish nationalist opponents, was not the best start to a reset. A more disciplined style would help Johnson to navigate these policy choices, with fewer reversals than we have seen so far, and with more goodwill than he might otherwise have enjoyed.

6. Improve and reform institutions instead of undermining them

It would be a waste to lose the zeal that Cummings and his team showed for [reforming the machinery of the state](#).⁶ Institutions from the BBC to the civil service and wider public sector sometimes need a hard shove to change.

But any government's objective should be to make those institutions better and stronger not to undermine them or bend them to the will of one person or faction. If Johnson wants to remake the state, he should reflect on how brittle the British constitutional and institutional checks are on governments that choose not to respect them, and how hard it is for the system to cope with genuine political crises. Incremental showers of reform will cleanse more effectively than a hard rain.

7. Look hard at the capability of the civil service

The prime minister should persist with [civil service reform](#),⁷ recognising that it is not one "thing" but a thousand specific improvements, and it is a hard slog. Rapidly assessing the capability of the civil service, both by individual departments and by cross-cutting function (finance, digital, human resources and so on) to find out its genuine strengths and weaknesses would be a good step. And Michael Gove is right that the government can make more use of its scientists and quantitative analysts and can do more to support its existing specialists as well as building up capacity. Then target improvements to skills, project management, policy making and operational implementation at those areas where it is most needed.

Reform can certainly include dismissing officials who are not up to the job, but insulting and patronising civil servants is something the prime minister should jettison. On the other hand, the energy and grit Cummings brought to the subject was welcome – the prime minister can look to Gove to keep up momentum.

8. Answer concerns about impropriety and patronage

The prime minister should read a recent lecture by Jonathan Evans⁸, the former director of MI5 and current chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. His assessment sets out where the government should take extra care to tackle the reality and perception of impropriety.

Lord Evans highlights the need for proper investigation of the conduct of ministers and officials when serious concerns are raised, as with Richard Desmond's Westferry planning application and the bullying allegations against the home secretary. He also warned about patronage and cronyism in public appointments, reinforcing concerns from Peter Riddell, the Commissioner for Public Appointments, that ministers were stretching the rules⁹ including at times packing interview panels as in the current competition for the Office for Students. And the temporary suspension of normal

procurement rules at the height of the coronavirus crisis might have been necessary, but it is crucial that all contracts are properly scrutinised and audited to look at their propriety and value for money.

9. Build on the coronavirus transformation of data and digital technology

It is right to sustain a passion for data. The British government has a systemic problem here that Cummings did well to highlight. [Data is poorly collected, under-analysed, and often not used properly](#),¹⁰ and the people with the skills to interpret it are not always listened to. But fixing a few television screens to the crumbling walls of the Cabinet Office in 70 Whitehall is a performative distraction. Sloganeering about using data better obscures the need to think deeply about what government wants to achieve by using data more effectively, and the ethical safeguards that should be in place to sustain public confidence.

The aim should be to [stimulate better data use](#)¹¹ across the whole of government. Ministers and senior officials must insist that policy submissions are data rich while the Cabinet Office can do more to impose common data standards.

In parallel, set higher expectations about what the government can do on digital and technology by encouraging innovation, keeping focused on new technologies, and not being afraid to fail. Be bold in scrapping legacy systems and investing in new technology, and use the appointment of a powerful new chief digital officer and a new head of the Government Digital Service to make a real change in the government's ambitions on digital services and to do more to build skills and capability on both data and digital.

10. Resist the temptation to centralise

Johnson's new team should end their instinct to centralise. However clever and talented the special advisers and civil servants in Number 10, it is impossible to run all of government from the centre. Cummings was right that the Cabinet Office and Number 10 need strengthening, but wrong to try to direct everything from mission control. A [loosening of their grip on departmental special advisers](#)¹² is a good start. And where policies can be more effectively delivered through local or regional government, they should do so. And, as shown by Johnson's devolution gaffe, the government needs a better strategy for working with the governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are many problems with local and regional government, and work to do with the devolved administrations, but for now Johnson's team should make sure the accountability is clear for different aspects of the Covid response and that local authorities have the resources they need.

Conclusion

Governing is complex and frustrating and the achievements which are worth most are often the product of years of effort. Cummings diagnosed many of the problems of modern government but did not always manage to recommend possible solutions; where he did, he leaves largely before they have been implemented. Johnson, if he maintains his will and focus, has a chance to build on the best of Cummings, but also to embrace the ambition of his manifesto, to back this up with detail, and to do so in his own voice.

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