



BORIS' RESHUFFLE:

PM LOOKS BEYOND BREXIT AND THE PANDEMIC TOWARDS THE NEXT ELECTION

Let's just say it as it is - patience isn't exactly a Johnsonian virtue. Which is why, with the polls narrowing, a party conference looming, and 18 months out from a possible early election, Johnson decided he couldn't wait any longer. For months politically and intellectually the Prime Minister has been elsewhere - itching to move on from the pandemic, from Brexit, from his Cabinet. He wants a new start - to set the tone for the next election; to demonstrate to his backbenchers, his detractors and his likely successor that he's in charge; to say to voters I'm doing things, I will deliver and I'm in it for the long haul.

Reshuffles are of course moments of high political theatre and No 10 will be pleased that the headline writers and leader writers see this as a major moment. But is it? In truth this was more a case of rearranging the furniture rather than a full-on redecoration. Some of the armchairs have been moved, ditched or re-covered but the lighting, wiring, and carpets look pretty familiar.

There were only four actual sackings (Williamson, Jenrick, Buckland and Milling), one big demotion (Raab), six promotions (Truss, Dorries, Barclay, Zahawi, Trevelyan and Clarke), two sideways moves (Gove, Dowden), but the majority, including Sunak, Patel, Javid, and Wallace stayed put.

Dorries, Zahawi and Clarke are the only new faces around the Cabinet table. In that sense it's far less of a clear out than the headlines suggest. It is also light on new talent - talent which will probably be being promoted at junior Ministerial level as you read this - and that will frustrate several eager MPs who wanted in this time round.

The reshuffle lacks any sort of clear stamp or imprint, but it does begin to address the issue of delivery. And that is one of the locks that needs picking ahead of the next election. Gove will likely be quietly pleased - his is the most radical move - a proven deliverer now charged with delivering: on levelling up, sorting planning and housing, and rebuilding communities and local government. As if that were not enough, he's still in charge of saving the Union. Johnson doesn't do trust, but in Gove, despite their history, the PM sees someone who can bring a grasp of detail to the biggest challenges facing the government - building back better post-Covid and levelling up. There's also the small matter of blame - if it doesn't happen, Gove will be left holding the pen.

Zahawi's promotion is merited - he's popular, has done a big job on vaccines, and he is very close to the PM. The same goes for Trevelyan, who is being rewarded for her loyalty and patience after losing her entire department when International Development was subsumed by the FCO last year. Truss's elevation at Raab's expense was inevitable after Afghanistan - she was an early backer of Johnson in 2019 and has played her cards well at DIT banging the drum for Global Britain.

The quirk surrounds Dowden - considered a safe pair of hands - and someone immersed in his brief at DCMS and apparently keen to stay put for the Platinum Jubilee next year. He was moved to Party Chair and replaced by Dorries. The answer could be that as deputy chief of staff to David Cameron, Dowden knows the party machinery well and can get it fighting fit ahead of the next election. Dorries was certainly the biggest surprise, and the reasoning here could be as simple as Johnson doing it because he could; he will probably be revelling in some of the consternation that's followed her appointment.

Dorries is far from a middle-of-the road politician and her combative stance on a range of so-called culture war issues will keep the party's core supporters animated, potentially helping to maintain the Tories 2019 electoral coalition even as Brexit recedes in the rear-view mirror. Above all, she is ultra-loyal and has been a Johnson supporter from pretty much the very beginning. When Johnson quit the 2016 leadership race she was famously caught on camera gasping in shock and close to tears.

Including Dorries, maybe half his Cabinet can now be considered loyalists, often a fleeting thing in politics but nevertheless, a thing. Of the sackings only Milling and Buckland will have been difficult personally for Johnson. Milling is a loyal friend, Buckland did little wrong, a victim of needing to create a space for Raab. Speaking of which, the Johnson/Raab bust up yesterday is classic Johnson. Raab was not keen on leaving the FCDO so offering him Justice, saying no to the title Deputy PM, arguing about it, then apparently changing his mind might look vacillating, but it may yet benefit the PM. He needs an insulator as deputy who isn't a rival in the way Gove, Sunak or Javid are.

If the PM goes for an early election in the Spring or early Summer of 2023, this could be the last major reshuffle in this Parliament. Ultimately, while important in terms of how the Government projects itself in Westminster and with the wider public, reshuffles do little to change the realities of governing. Johnson's most immediate challenges include preventing Covid from getting out of control again and delivering a budget and long-term spending review amid rising tensions between No 10 and HMT. There is no shortage of worthy claims on the public purse, but Sunak is determined to restore a degree of fiscal conservatism and as we have seen it is impossible to maintain low taxes, low borrowing and high spending - hence the rows over the National Insurance hike to fund the NHS and social care and the withdrawal of the £20 Universal Credit uplift. Tory backbenchers fret a lot about Johnson's embrace of spending.

Beyond that there is the challenge of delivering meaningful progress on levelling up and climate change, the spectre of perma-conflict with the EU over the Northern Ireland Protocol and the battle to maintain the Union, with the SNP's renewed independence push set to stress test the UK's constitutional architecture.

Many Tories have been willing to cut Johnson some slack because he's their best campaigner and a proven winner. But if he's to stand a chance of achieving his recent very public and deliberate proclamation that he wants to surpass Thatcher's eleven-and-a-half years in office, its delivery, not reupholstered furniture, that really matters. Johnson's future and the country's direction will ultimately come down to how he manages to square traditional Tory principles with addressing the long list of challenges in his Red Box.



Will Walden is Edelman's senior counsel for strategic communications across EMEA. A former political journalist he was Boris Johnson's spokesman, communications director, and chief advisor for many years.

WINNERS



Liz Truss

Truss is undoubtedly the big winner. Seen as the deliverer of the economic aspect of Global Britain with a raft of post-Brexit roll-over trade deals to her name, Truss now gets to try to define Britain's wider role in an uncertain and volatile world. An incredibly popular minister with the party grassroots she now has the platform to speak the party and the public. The only previous Chief Secretary of the Treasury to become Foreign Secretary was John Major...



Ben Wallace

Wallace came into the Cabinet as Defence Secretary two years ago as a relative unknown and had a bumpy first year in the job. But his surefooted handling of the Integrated Security and Defence Review and more recently the military's role in the Afghan withdrawal (compared to the diplomatic failures) and his reliably strong media performances have shored up his relationships with Number 10. As a relatively independent-minded voice round the Cabinet table his status has increased, just in time for the Spending Review.



Micheal Gove

Having ensured the transition to post-Brexit trading arrangements didn't collapse the economy, Gove, the government's fixer-in-chief has been sent to the Housing and Communities department to rescue the botched planning reforms. The department's remit has been beefed up as Gove takes on responsibility for translating levelling up from a slogan into a concrete policy agenda. It's chunky brief and a big responsibility at the core of Johnson's leadership and one that is ideally suited to Gove who is seen as an intellectual powerhouse with a reforming zeal.



Nadhim Zahawi

From vaccines minister to Education Secretary, Zahawi makes a big leap into one of the big spending jobs in Cabinet. His personal journey from child refugee who couldn't speak English to millionaire businessman and successful politician is the definition of a social mobility that Boris Johnson wants to tell the nation is possible for everyone. With a department on its knees after a series of mis-steps during the pandemic, the optimistic, energetic entrepreneur and political fixer who's overseen the single biggest government response to the pandemic has the skills to get the department back on track.

LOSERS



Gavin Williamson

While Williamson's defenestration was expected after his difficult tenure at Education, it doesn't make it any less brutal. His mishandling of exams managed to alienate everyone from parents, pupils, teaching unions to Tory MPs and even the politically neutral Institute for Government. The former Chief Whip was seen by many to have been more interested in political machinations than the details of his brief. Williamson may have hoped these machinations might keep him in the Cabinet but he was wrong and returns to potentially cause problems from the backbenches.



Dominic Raab

Raab is another big loser of the reshuffle. At the height of the pandemic he was the acting Prime Minister while Johnson lay gravely ill, and just over a year later he's been demoted from one of the great offices of state to a mid-ranking post as Justice Secretary. With a department that he clearly struggled to get outside, authority had been ebbing away from Raab before the Kabul crisis but his handling both of his personal role (beach-gate) and the diplomatic failures ensured that his remaining time at King Charles Street was going to be limited. He left the role after fractious negotiations with the PM's team about his status before being confirmed as Deputy Prime Minister – it remains to be seen what this will entail in practice beyond occasionally stepping in for Johnson at PMQs. But the challenges he will face at the MOJ are weighty with the courts system creaking at the seams and in desperate need of investment and reform.



Robert Jenrick

On those awful mornings when there was only bad news for the government and no minister was available to do the broadcast round, Jenrick was the ever-dependable person who would pick up the phone and tour the studios. The Number 10 press office loved him for it. But the Prime Minister is clear: he needs ministers who can deliver the goods. For Jenrick, the Tory defeat at the Chesham and Amersham by-election was terminal – that result killed the planning reforms that would have helped build hundreds of thousands of new homes. Now Number 10 have asked Gove to find a way through this problem that keeps green belt Tories on side. Jenrick returns to the backbenches though at only 39 years old, the odds are he will get another shot.

REACTION



Sebastian Payne

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Whitehall Editor, Financial Times

The appointment of @SimonClarkeMP, one of the most prominent red wall Tories, as chief secretary is a signal Boris Johnson wants to smash the Treasury orthodoxy. Along with Gove, shows this reshuffle is about levelling up.

80:08 PM · 15 Sep 2021



Jill Rutter

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The gov't is in the middle of a serious spending review; finalising its net zero strategy and levelling up White Paper, delivering a successful COP etc. It suggests that Cabinet ministers are pretty irrelevant to those if it's a good time for a #reshuffle.

09:21 AM · 15 Sep 2021



Beth Rigby

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Political Editor, Sky News

One more on #Reshuffle. PM known for rewarding loyalty, but he was ruthless in sacking loyal ministers Williamson/Jenrick. Perhaps a message that loyalty alone doesn't cut it these days as he looks for delivery of policy? (whether that happens w Covid/tight budgets another matter.

10:50 PM · 15 Sep 2021



Gavin Freeguard

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These moves would mean a *TENTH* DCMS Sec of State in under 11.5 years. An average of just 15 months each. Not much of an in-tray. Just major data reforms/National Data Strategy, Online Harms, digital strategy, AI strategy, post-pandemic arts/creative industries recovery... that level of disruption at the top of the department is ludicrous.

04:45 PM · 15 Sep 2021

POLITICO

"Gove's move to MHCLG is one of the most fascinating developments, as he also assumes cross-governmental responsibility for leveling up and the union. It's been widely observed this puts him back in a big reforming brief with oversight of housing and the thorny matter of planning. A government official tells *Playbook*: 'It's a signal MHCLG is being politically beefed up'."

Daily Mail

"Boris Johnson has promoted ex-I'm A Celebrity star Nadine Dorries to fight the woke warriors as Culture Secretary in a day of bloodshed during his reshuffle."

ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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ANALYSIS FROM



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