



BONUS CASE STUDY: MAY AND HER 2016 CABINET RESHUFFLE

Events

Within 48 hours of replacing David Cameron as prime minister in July 2016, Theresa May had carried out one of the most brutal culls in modern UK political history. Nine members of Cameron's top team were sacked or chose to resign either for personal reasons or because they were unwilling to accept the job they were offered. A further eight were retained but were moved to other posts. This left just four members of Cameron's cabinet who kept their old jobs – Michael Fallon (defence secretary), Jeremy Hunt (health secretary), David Mundell (Scottish secretary) and Alun Cairns (Welsh secretary). No fewer than 12 members of May's new team had any previous cabinet experience.

Significance

Most incoming prime ministers who, like May, are appointed without having won an election, and so without having gained a mandate of their own, tend to emphasise stability and continuity when forming their first cabinet. May very clearly departed from this trend, for two reasons.

First, despite having, in 2015, won the first Conservative Commons majority since 1992, Cameron was associated with a style of government, a 'chumocracy' of his close friends and inner circle, and a modernising agenda that had attracted deep criticism from certain parts of the Conservative Party. This provided May with the opportunity to break openly with her predecessor's legacy and, in the process, to establish her own authority. The highest profile casualties of the reshuffle were

therefore the ministers who had been closest to Cameron – George Osborne, Nicky Morgan, Michael Gove, Oliver Letwin and so on – while those promoted were often either independent figures such as Philip Hammond (chancellor of the exchequer) or people on whose loyalty May could count, such as Amber Rudd (home secretary), Liz Truss (education secretary) and Justine Greening (justice secretary).

Second, May was forced to construct a cabinet clearly committed to delivering Brexit, especially as she herself was a 'Remainer', albeit a reluctant one. The number of 'Brexiters' in the cabinet increased from four to seven, but May's crucial move was to appoint high-profile Brexiteers to the three posts most closely linked to the process of EU withdrawal – Boris Johnson (foreign secretary), Liam Fox (international trade secretary) and David Davis (Brexit secretary). Although this created the danger that the prime minister would lose control in this most vital and controversial policy area, May emphasised her strategic leadership of the Brexit process and ensured that she chaired the cabinet committee on Brexit and international trade. Indeed, the 'three Brexiteers' may have been appointed, in part, to provide May with political cover, in the sense that backbench Conservative disgruntlement with aspects of Brexit might focus on one or more of them, rather than on the prime minister personally. These dangers became apparent when Johnson and Davis resigned over the direction of travel after the Chequers plan was unveiled.