Government reshuffles

The case for keeping ministers in post longer

Tom Sasse, Tim Durrant, Emma Norris and Ketaki Zodgekar

Summary

After winning a working majority of 87 in the December 2019 general election, Boris Johnson has set out an ambitious agenda to reshape the economy and transform government. It is reported that he will appoint the cabinet and junior ministerial team to deliver these reforms in early February, after the UK leaves the European Union. Up to a third of current ministers could be moved or replaced in the reshuffle, with new ministers chosen based on “their expertise and ability to drive change”.

The prime minister’s focus on competence is welcome. But to increase the likelihood that reforms succeed, he should, over the course of the parliament, avoid the constant ‘churn’ of ministers that has characterised UK governments in recent decades.

Ministers have a crucial role in government, setting the direction of departments and taking the key decisions involved in running them. Once appointed, they must master a complex brief (often from scratch), build relationships with their officials and stakeholders, develop a clear plan for what they want to achieve – and then oversee its implementation.

Yet ministers in the UK have remarkably short tenures. Since 1997, secretaries of state have stayed in post for two years on average; in some roles, junior ministers typically last little more than a year. Several departments have suffered from constant changes in leadership: for example, since 1997, there have been no fewer than 18 housing ministers.
This compares unfavourably with some other countries – the equivalent to a secretary of state in Germany stays in office on average more than 300 days longer – as well as with private companies: top UK executives average over five years in post.

Such constant change undermines good government. It means ministers lack the expertise they need to do their jobs effectively and are unable to see policies through to results. It means Parliament finds it difficult to hold ministers to account for the outcomes of their decisions. And it means departments suffer constant changes in direction, crippling efforts at long-term reform and creating confusion and waste.

This is a major weakness of the British system of government: as one former secretary of state put it, it is not “a serious way to run a country”.

Rapid turnover of ministers is exacerbated by the fact that the civil servants who advise them also change roles often.

By contrast, consistent political leadership tends to be a feature of the most successful reforms and major projects – from the introduction of the national minimum wage in 1999 to the 2012 London Olympics (perceived as a triumph of performance, despite the preparations for the games running over budget).

There are good reasons why a prime minister should replace or promote ministers. Moving a poor performer might be essential if he or she appears unable to turn around a department’s results. More broadly, shuffling ministers and promoting talent from the backbenches is a prime minister’s main source of power: the means by which he or she can maintain discipline and manage different party factions.

At times, prime ministers have little choice but to make changes, for instance when a scandal erupts or when a minister resigns over a policy difference, as has happened frequently with Brexit.

But while some changes are necessary or unavoidable, ministers interviewed for our Ministers Reflect series have suggested that many are not, and instead harm government’s ability to get things done.

In this paper, we use new data to set out the speed of ministerial changes and the damage this has caused, in areas such as housing and further education, and explain how prime ministers could achieve a better balance between continuity and change. Doing so would help them improve the effectiveness of government.
Ministers in UK government change jobs very often

UK secretaries of state and junior ministers change roles regularly, particularly in some departments and roles. This turnover is high compared with other countries and private companies, and it has accelerated in recent decades.

In some departments, secretaries of state stay in post for less than 18 months

While secretaries of state in the UK typically stay around two years in post, this masks considerable variation. Chancellors spend on average around four years in post, but transport and welfare secretaries survive less than 18 months.

Figure 1: Number ofsecretaries of state and selected ministers in post by role, 1997 to 2018

David Cameron, prime minister between 2010 and 2016, recognised that such rapid turnover was harmful, arguing there is no point “in endlessly moving people between different jobs”. During the 2010–15 coalition government he did achieve more continuity in cabinet posts, keeping secretaries of state in departments such as the Foreign Office, the Home Office and the Department for Education in post longer (see Figure 2). But his governments still suffered from rapid change in other cabinet posts and junior positions – and this has got worse under subsequent governments.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has had seven secretaries of state since 2010, including five since 2015, disrupting reforms to prisons and courts; the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), often considered an enjoyable stop-off en route to more important roles, has had eight.

The Department for Work and Pensions – which has been overseeing the implementation of Universal Credit, one of the most significant welfare reforms in recent decades – has had six different secretaries of state in less than four years, since Iain Duncan Smith.

Since 2015, the average secretary of state has remained in post just 18 months. Some turnover under the May government was driven by events beyond the prime minister’s control, such as ministers resigning due to scandals, and there were an unprecedented number of resignations due to disagreements over Brexit policy – yet this figure remains remarkable.

* Formerly the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; the D, for ‘digital’ was added in 2017.

Figure 2: Secretaries of state (or equivalent) at each department since May 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Post holders</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DCMS</td>
<td>Hunt, Miller, Javid, Whittingdale, Bradley, Hancock, Wright, Morgan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoJ</td>
<td>Clarke, Grayling, Gove, Truss, Lidington, Cawisle, Buckland, Morgan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DWP</td>
<td>Duncan Smith, Crabb, Green, Gauke, McVey, Rudd, Coffey</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoD</td>
<td>Fox, Hammond, Fallon, Williamson, Mordaunt, Wallace</td>
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<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Maude, Hancock, Gummer, Green, Lidington, Dowden, Sharma</td>
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<tr>
<td>DfID</td>
<td>Mitchell, Greening, Patel, Mordaunt, Stewart, Villiers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defra</td>
<td>Spelman, Paterson, Truss, Leadsom, Gove, Villiers</td>
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<tr>
<td>FCO</td>
<td>Hague, Hammond, Johnson, Hunt, Raab</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIT</td>
<td>Hammond, Greening, McLoughlin, Grayling, Shapps</td>
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<tr>
<td>DfE</td>
<td>Gove, Morgan, Greening, Hinds, Williamson</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIO</td>
<td>Paterson, Villiers, Brokenhorne, Bradley, Smith</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCLG/MHCLG</td>
<td>Pickles, Clark, Javid, Brokenhorne, Jervis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scot</td>
<td>Alexander, Moore, Carmichael, Mundell, Jack</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wal</td>
<td>Gillan, Jones, Crabb, Cairns, Hart</td>
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<td>HO</td>
<td>May, Rudd, Javid, Patel</td>
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<tr>
<td>DExEU</td>
<td>Davis, Shapps, Barnley</td>
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<tr>
<td>DH/DHSC</td>
<td>Lansley, Hunt, Hancock</td>
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<td>HMT</td>
<td>Osborne, Hammond, Javid</td>
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<td>DIT</td>
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<td>BEIS</td>
<td>Clark, Leadsom</td>
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<tr>
<td>DECC</td>
<td>Huhne, Davey, Rudd</td>
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<tr>
<td>BIS</td>
<td>Cable, Javid</td>
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</tbody>
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Junior ministers move around even more quickly

Junior ministers tend to have even shorter tenures than secretaries of state. A lack of data means it is not possible to calculate an average tenure figure for all junior ministers across government, but we were able to calculate figures for specific roles.

As with DCMS, turnover is often particularly rapid in junior ministerial roles that are considered ‘stepping stones’ on the way to further promotion, such as in housing and immigration. While recent governments have said addressing the housing crisis is a priority, the average minister of state for housing since 1997 has stayed in post just 14 months.

Figure 3: Timeline of ministers of state for housing, 1979 to 2020

There have been eight housing ministers since 2010: the longest in post – Grant Shapps – stayed just over two years; three ministers lasted nine months or less. By contrast, average tenure between the 1950s and the 1980s was over two years, and several ministers stayed in post for four or five years.

Rapid turnover of junior ministers means that many departments have lacked experience in recent years. This is a problem that will continue into 2020: ahead of February’s planned reshuffle, already three quarters of current ministers have been in post less than a year (see Figure 4, overleaf).
Ministerial turnover has accelerated in recent decades

Between 1945 and 1997, the average secretary of state stayed in post over two and a half years, while ministers stayed over two years in many junior roles. But turnover has accelerated in recent decades under both main parties.

**Figure 4: Length of time in post of current ministers by department**

Source: Institute for Government ministerial database, using sources including GOV.UK and parliament.uk. Johnson (July) includes all changes before December (for example, in response to resignations in September).

When both secretaries of state and junior ministers change frequently, departments are left with little or no continuity. In seven departments, none of the current ministerial team was in place before July 2019.

**Ministerial turnover has accelerated in recent decades**

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**Figure 5: Changes in secretary of state by department and party, 1979 to 2019**

Source: Institute for Government ministerial database and Butler’s British Political Facts. Listed by current department.
The average tenure of secretaries of state varies globally – but it is affected by different systems of government

In some countries, including the US and France, the average tenure of a secretary of state (or their equivalent) is even shorter, suggesting this problem is not restricted to the UK. In others, such as Germany, Sweden and Spain, it is considerably longer. However, there are important differences in the systems of government in these countries which affect how these figures should be interpreted.

Figure 6: Average number of years in post of secretaries of state (or equivalent) in selected countries, 1990 to 2014

First, the UK has a majoritarian system of government in which, despite recent experience, coalition governments are rare. One of the key supposed advantages of the ‘first-past-the-post’ voting system is that, historically at least, it has tended to produce stable majority governments that survive a full term. Countries that use other electoral systems, such as Belgium and Italy, tend to have short-lived coalition governments that account for the short tenure of key decision makers.

Second, UK prime ministers can conventionally draw their ministers only from the legislature. This means that they have a comparatively narrow pool to choose from and often appoint ministers with little relevant experience or expertise. In many other countries – such as the US, France, Germany and the Netherlands – leaders can appoint ministers from beyond the legislature, and typically choose people based on prior expertise. Rapid turnover is more damaging when it takes ministers longer to learn the job.
Ministers move on quickly compared with top company executives

The tenure of both secretaries of state and ministers in the UK is very short compared with leaders of other organisations. The average CEO of a FTSE 100 company stays in post over five years, more than twice the average secretary of state. In fact, secretaries of state only have marginally more job security than managers in the top four English football leagues, who are hired and fired notoriously quickly.

While five-year tenures would be difficult to replicate in a democratic government with the pressures of party politics, the figure indicates that the private sector recognises the value of continuity.

![Figure 7: Average tenure of leaders in government, business and football clubs (years)](image)


Rapid turnover of ministers undermines good government

Frequent change at the top undermines good government, reducing the effectiveness of ministers, inviting constant policy reinvention and hampering long-term reform. These problems are made worse by the fact that civil servants also change jobs frequently.

It takes time for ministers to learn how to do the job

To be appointed a minister is to take on a very demanding role. Many ministers interviewed for our Ministers Reflect archive emphasised that it takes a lot of time to develop the expertise and build the relationships needed to do the job effectively.

Ben Bradshaw, who held five ministerial posts between 2001 and 2010, said:

“It’s only really after two years, particularly as a junior minister, that you know enough to be fully effective and to challenge the civil servants and ask the questions that need to be asked.”

6
Ken Clarke, who served in numerous posts including chancellor of the exchequer and health secretary, agreed:

“After two years, you are sitting in control now, behind your desk, where you are going to do this, this and this. And then the phone rings and the prime minister is having a reshuffle and you are back at the beginning... panicking again.”

As did Jacqui Smith, who served as a junior minister in posts including health, industry and schools under Tony Blair’s Labour government, and later as home secretary under Gordon Brown:

“After about six months you think this job is impossible. Then you begin to develop relationships and get a feel for things. After about 18 months you think ‘I have got a grip of this, I know what I want to do and I am beginning to see the results of what I have been trying to do’ and then after two years you get shifted on somewhere else.”

Richard Harrington, who held three junior ministerial roles in the May government, explained why he resisted being moved:

“Given that I’d spent a year trying to get some expertise... Any other business or job you’d think the taxpayer’s paid a lot of money in management time, in civil service time to get me to a level where I knew what I was talking about. Then to say I’m going off to another department.”

These reflections accord with staff performance in businesses and other professions. For complex, ‘knowledge-based’ roles – such as professional services, law or civil service policy work – most people will take between a year and two years to reach their full productivity, and they remain at that level until they have been in post for around four years.

The time taken to reach full productivity tends to be longer at senior levels, where staff need to build good relationships in order to work effectively with other organisations and to manage a team well – to become a ‘high-output manager’, in the words of a book the prime minister’s chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, has made recommended reading in Whitehall.

Successful private companies invest significant resources to prevent unnecessary churn and ensure they maximise the amount of time their staff are at peak performance, especially those in key roles. Government is not business – prime ministers cannot manage their cabinet as a manager would a team in another organisation. But they could and should take steps to ensure their ministerial team is likely to perform better. A good first step would be to avoid moving ministers just as they start to get a grip on the role.

In previous Institute for Government research, we identified that rapid turnover of ministers was further compounded by inadequate preparation for the job and a lack of proper guidance or performance appraisal.

* For a summary of the human resources literature see Sasse T and Norris E, Moving On: The costs of high staff turnover in the civil service, Institute for Government, 2019, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/moving-on-staff-turnover-civil-service
Ministers are not able to see decisions through to results and so cannot be held accountable

Good results often rely on a ‘golden thread’ from identifying a problem through to developing a proposed intervention, testing different approaches, implementing a policy and monitoring outcomes.\(^{13}\)

But frequent turnover means ministers are often not able to complete a piece of policy development, let alone see it through to implementation. Rory Stewart, former secretary of state for international development, highlighted this problem:

“Our terms are absurdly short. I held five ministerial jobs in four years. Just as I was completing my 25-year environment plan, I was made Middle East minister. Just as I was trying to change our aid policy, I was made the Africa minister. Just as I was finishing my Africa strategy, I was moved to prisons. I promised to reduce violence in prisons in 12 months, and violence was just beginning to come down – when I was made secretary of state for international development. How can this be a serious way to run a country?”\(^{14}\)

This means the expertise of a minister who helped to develop and launch a policy – and the relationships they built – cannot be utilised effectively during implementation.

When ministers have been kept in post longer, projects and policies have benefitted. Tessa Jowell, who as minister for the Olympics between 2005 and 2010 oversaw preparations for the 2012 games, told us that “the cumbersome nature of the governance made even more important the development of strong personal working relationships of trust and confidence between key players”.\(^ {15}\)

Continuity among junior ministers is especially important to implementation when a policy is complex and contested.\(^{16}\) For example, Lord Whitty, parliamentary under-secretary in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) between 2001 and 2005 and a longstanding champion of action to address fuel poverty, was key to the success of the Warm Front scheme, a project to make homes more energy-efficient.\(^ {17}\)

Frequent turnover also makes it difficult for Parliament to hold ministers to account for their actions – particularly when a policy is designed badly and runs into implementation problems. By then, ministerial architects of policies have often moved on. While select committees have started to recall some civil servants who have left their posts, they rarely recall former ministers. We have argued they should do so – and there should be a presumption that former ministers should respond to such calls.\(^{18}\)

Without an expectation that they will stay in post or the knowledge that there is strong accountability, ministers have little incentive to focus on long-term success, which may require longer timetables or greater expense. As Nick Raynsford, housing minister between 1999 and 2001, said:

“If ministers think they are only going to be in post for a few months, they will inevitably only focus on short-term initiatives, which may earn them a good headline but are unlikely to deliver substantial and lasting benefits.”\(^ {19}\)
Constant changes in direction cripple efforts to deliver long-term reform

As well as undermining specific policies, constant changes in direction cripple government’s efforts to deliver long-term reform in key areas and lead to confusion and waste as policies are adopted and abandoned.

In a 2017 report, we identified the government’s tendency to recreate policies and organisations with alarming regularity. Ministers feel they are rewarded for announcing policies rather than delivering them; they are encouraged to ‘make their mark’ in order to get noticed, rather than continuing with work initiated by their predecessor. We highlighted areas including industrial strategy and further education – both priorities for the new administration – where policy churn had been particularly damaging.

Industrial strategy requires a long-term vision and some certainty for business in order to be effective. But there have been three industrial strategies in the past decade alone, based on the changing political views of ministers and prime ministers – and the institutions that are supposed to deliver these strategies keep changing. If the new government is to succeed in its ambition of ‘levelling up’ the fortunes of different parts of the UK, some stability would be a good base to build on.

In further education, we found that since the 1980s there had been 48 ministers, 28 major pieces of legislation, and no organisation created to oversee skills and training had lasted longer than a decade. The UK is widely considered to have fallen behind other countries, such as Germany, in further education over this period.

The 2019 Augar Review – established to look at post-18 education and whose findings the new administration is considering – concluded that further education had been subject to “neglect”.

A forthcoming study of overall education policy documents similar problems. It finds that over the last 40 years there has been:

“continuous policy change including changes to the national curriculum, assessment, examination and qualifications, vocational provision, teaching and learning, special needs, safeguarding, behaviour, societal needs and institutional organisation”.

New reforms are introduced as schools struggle to adapt to previous ones; often, by the time teachers complete training in a new approach it is out of date. Again, a ‘revolving door’ at the top – there have been 19 secretaries of state for education and 98 ministers over the last four decades – has been a key factor in constant policy reinvention.

Other policy areas have also suffered dizzying changes in direction. Under the seven different justice secretaries since 2010, the justice system has been subject to repeated swings between tougher and more liberal policies, with several ministers’ reforms quickly undone by their successors. Similarly, with 18 different housing ministers since 1997, the UK has often lacked a department strong enough to articulate a coherent housing policy.
Short ministerial tenures are exacerbated by rapid turnover of civil servants

Ministerial turnover would be less of a problem if the civil servants advising them stayed in post for longer. But our research has found this often does not happen.\(^\text{27}\) As Figure 8 shows, several departments lose a fifth of their workforce each year – and that is without counting internal moves, which are also common. Many civil servants stay in post 18 months or less, as Whitehall’s culture and workforce model encourages them to move around quickly in order to progress in their career.\(^\text{28}\)

**Figure 8: Percentage of civil servants who left their departments, 2017/18 and 2018/19**

![Figure 8: Percentage of civil servants who left their departments, 2017/18 and 2018/19](image)

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, and ONS, Public Sector Employment. Numbers are for departments excluding all agencies and public bodies.

Among senior civil servants, who spend more time working directly with ministers, turnover is particularly high. The civil service was unable to provide data for the past two years, but figures for 2016/17 showed that in six departments a new minister would find that 40% of their senior officials had been in post less than a year.\(^\text{29}\)

This undermines the civil service’s ability to offer ministers good, impartial expertise. Lord Freud, minister for welfare between 2010 and 2016, explained that the turnover of officials was so constant that he, in effect, became the institutional memory:

“I sat there for six and a half years, looking at the third, fourth, fifth generation of a person doing a particular area: there is no corporate knowledge retained. That’s just a massive vulnerability.”\(^\text{30}\)

But Lord Freud’s tenure was longer than most; many ministers survive a quarter of that time or less. This means that on complex decisions of great importance to the public, inexperienced ministers are advised by similarly inexperienced officials.
There are good reasons for moving ministers

Appointing ministers is an important prerogative of the prime minister, and several factors help explain why the UK suffers from particularly high ministerial turnover.

**Appointing and replacing ministers is a prime minister’s main source of power**

Hiring and firing ministers, or being able to threaten to do so, is one of the main ways prime ministers manage their party. Prime ministers balance competing factors: deciding who should be rewarded and who should remain on the backbenches; ensuring factions within their party feel represented; and giving newer MPs opportunities to progress, thereby securing their support.

As Andrew Turnbull, cabinet secretary between 2005 and 2011, put it:

“It’s a dysfunctional system but it’s there because politics is a competitive game and control of promotions is a key source of power for prime ministers.”

In countries where ministers can be drawn from beyond the legislature, leaders do not face this problem to the same extent.

Reshuffling the cabinet and junior ministers is also one of the prime minister’s key tools for managing performance. If a minister is failing to deliver a key reform or has lost the confidence of stakeholders or the public, replacing them can be crucial to the government achieving its aims – and not being seen to be incompetent in the eyes of the media and the public. This is particularly the case in high-pressure departments, such as the Department of Health and Social Care or the Home Office.

Prime ministers also need to develop a good supply of junior ministers, with a broad range of experience ready to take on more demanding cabinet briefs. They also rely on trusted ministers to troubleshoot in different departments.

**Prime ministers have lots of posts to fill – and there are few barriers to making changes**

Two other factors help explain why prime ministers are able to shuffle ministers with such frequency. First, the UK has more departments and ministerial posts than other countries: the cabinet in the UK currently has 33 attendees, compared with 16 in the US cabinet and just 15 in the German Bundeskabinett. Cummings has previously argued in favour of making the cabinet smaller, which would be sensible.

There are over 100 junior ministerial roles, and that is before you start counting parliamentary private secretaries and special envoys. The total number of all of these roles – the so-called ‘payroll vote’, because they are presumed always to vote with the government in Parliament – has been increasing in recent years. This means that British prime ministers have more opportunities to make moves than their counterparts in other countries.

* There are 23 full members plus 10 further ministers who attend cabinet.
Second, there is a low bar to making changes. Constitutionally, prime ministers have a huge amount of discretion: they can fire ministers, offer them new posts or offer their posts to others as they see fit. In other countries, such as the US, those appointed to secretary of state position must pass a hearing in the Senate before taking office.

But while there are good reasons for moving ministers, and reasons why the UK system might be more vulnerable to churn than others, prime ministers should balance the temptation to play musical chairs against the harm it causes to the effectiveness of government.

**Prime ministers should achieve a better balance**

Rapid turnover of ministers has always been a feature of the British system of government, but has got more extreme in recent decades. There are several steps prime ministers should take to manage their ministerial teams better.

**Establish a clear expectation about time in post**

As with the civil service, the prime minister should establish a clear expectation about the minimum time that a minister will spend in any role. The Institute for Government has previously recommended that prime ministers should aim to apply a minimum term for ministers – three years for secretaries of state and two for junior ministers – to avoid the frequent changes that have undermined effectiveness.

Some roles will require longer in post – such as areas that are complex and require in-depth understanding of an issue and stable relationships with those outside government, or those that have been neglected, such as housing. The prime minister should identify and plan for these.

Of course, keeping ministers in post longer will not be possible in all circumstances. If ministers think they are unsackable, because they know they will be in the job for a fixed period of time, they may be less willing to remain loyal to the prime minister. Clearly, at times a prime minister will need – and should be able – to remove people from their roles, but barring disloyalty, poor performance or unforeseen circumstances, a minimum term should be a basic expectation of any ministerial appointment.

Reducing the frequency of reshuffles would also help establish the expectation that ministers will spend more time in one role. While turnover remained high in some roles, the 2010–15 coalition government actively sought to hold fewer reshuffles. Alan Johnson, who served in various cabinet roles under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, told us that “It’s one of the things that David Cameron got right, he didn’t have constant reshuffles. We had far too many.”

Following the expected reshuffle in early February, the prime minister should resist the temptation to embark on a major reshuffle again for at least two years.
Develop a pipeline of talent

Some decisions in reshuffles may be made hastily – to fill an unexpected departure or because someone has refused to be moved. Reshuffles can often be haphazard, with lots of last-minute decisions when things do not go to plan. If people refuse to move, as Jeremy Hunt did in Theresa May’s January 2018 reshuffle, this will have a knock-on effect on the rest of the prime minister’s planned moves. 38

Former cabinet secretary Gus O’Donnell told an Institute for Government event that at reshuffles names are moved around a board and “eventually they end up somewhere… or not”. 39 The team in No.10 will have thoughts about what they want to change and the Whips’ Office takes some responsibility for thinking through who should be promoted. But following a premeditated plan for each person, and each role, is never going to be possible.

Nonetheless, much more could be done to think ahead, to assess which vacancies are likely to arise (or which No.10 wants to arise) and which potential ministers have the experience and skills to succeed in those roles. Thinking ahead in this way would also allow prime ministers to consider which experiences or skills their ministers lack. Identifying these gaps and moving ministers to jobs where they can develop new skills will help build a steady pipeline of talent for future cabinet roles.

Some ministers would like a much more formal process. Jim Knight, who held several junior ministerial roles between 2005 and 2010, suggested that the government run a regular process with ministers and MPs to identify this pipeline. 40 He suggested that this could involve:

“having an appraisal with a minister and finding out how they’re getting on, what they think they’re good at and what they think they’re not so good at. What they would like their next job to be, whether they would like a move soon or whether they would like to stay where they are.”

Better planning could certainly help avoid times when a reshuffle brings about a complete turnover of the entire ministerial team of a department within a short time. George Eustice, who served as a junior minister at Defra under four secretaries of state, told us that “I think to have a minister of state underneath who stays in position for a long time, in an area where they’ve got expertise, can be incredibly beneficial.”

Gus O’Donnell also said that prime ministers should build a team for each department, rather than appointing secretaries of state first and then moving down the ministerial ranks. 41 Such a team should take into account ministers’ skills and experiences and ensure they complement each other.

It will never be possible to plan every move, as the political reality of reshuffles makes for an inherently uncertain process. But planning for the long term and focusing more on the pipeline of talent will help ministers develop into their roles.
Improve handovers between ministers

When ministers do change roles, they rarely speak to the person who was doing the job before them. Many professional roles will have a formal ‘handover’ period in which the incoming postholder spends time with the incumbent to get a feel for the role and meet key colleagues. Due to the immediate nature of reshuffles – and the political rivalry involved – this generally doesn’t happen with ministers. However, some do take advantage of former ministers still in Westminster; as health secretary, Jeremy Hunt even appeared on a panel at an Institute for Government event with four of his predecessors to discuss the role.62

Many ministers say they would welcome more formal handovers. David Hanson, who served in various junior ministerial roles in the last Labour government, said that each time he started a job he “got a pile of baggage from the predecessor that you have to see through” but that he never got any opportunity to discuss those issues with his predecessors. Nicky Morgan, as education secretary, did manage to have discussions with her predecessor, Michael Gove, who had moved to become chief whip; she told us that it was “very helpful to have him around to be able to ask questions”.44

But Morgan’s experience is the exception, not the norm. A handover discussion, covering the key decisions that the previous minister made and their biggest concerns would help the new minister get up to speed more quickly.

Many ministers quickly move on to the next job and may be reluctant to talk to the person who has taken their job, particularly if they didn’t want to be moved. But if the prime minister wants better-performing ministers, he could encourage new appointees to talk to their predecessors, and ensure that officials provide the support necessary to make such discussions happen. Former ministers sharing their thoughts on the role that they have just vacated would be of use to their successors. Even where an incoming minister may not agree with their predecessor’s stance on an issue, understanding why they took such a position will be useful.

Conclusion

Stability is seen as a core strength of the British system of government. Voters elect a party based on a clear set of manifesto commitments; the electoral system tends to return strong majority governments that can deliver those policies once in power. Recent elections have not all followed this pattern, but the image of strong and stable government is also undermined by the fact that even majority governments – and the secretaries of state and ministers who serve in them – are often so vulnerable to destabilising turnover.

The main political parties and the civil service all agree that constant turnover of ministers is a core problem. It prevents ministers from mastering their roles and departments from delivering long-term reforms in areas which matter deeply to the public, from education to housing to industrial strategy.
The steps required to address it are simple. Establishing clear expectations about longer tenures, making reshuffles less frequent and planning successions more carefully would all help prime ministers – with whom the decision on ministerial appointments ultimately rests – to manage their team more effectively.

Other reforms to the way government works will attract more attention, but implementing these simple changes – and ensuring departments have stable leadership – would be one of the most important steps the prime minister could take to help his government deliver on its promises.
About the authors

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