

Brexit, butchery and Boris: Theresa May and her first cabinet

Abstract

This note analyses the formation of Theresa May's first cabinet. It locates her appointments against the backdrop of the Brexit referendum and compares them to those of other prime ministers who took office during the lifetime of a parliament. The scale of May's reconstruction marks her out as one of the readier 'butchers' of Downing Street. It demonstrated her acceptance of the Brexit referendum result, signalled a clear break with Cameron and served to consolidate her power base. It also demonstrated the huge potential leeway enjoyed by new prime ministers. However, while wholesale ministerial butchery can be empowering, demonstrations of ruthlessness are no guarantee for future power.

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On Wednesday 13 July 2016, Theresa May became Britain's new prime minister. Her predecessor, David Cameron, had announced his resignation less than three weeks earlier following the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, when 51.9% of voters backed leaving the EU or 'Brexit'. May was well placed to succeed him. Her low-profile support for the 'remain' side during the campaign, and her swift acceptance that 'Brexit means Brexit' in the wake of the vote, made her the most 'acceptable' candidate for a bitterly divided Conservative Party (Quinn, 2012). Her appeal was further bolstered by her reputation as a 'safe pair of hands' (Coulson, 2016). As her rivals dropped out of the leadership contest during its parliamentary stage, May emerged as the only candidate.

Like previous prime ministers who took office during the lifetime of a parliament, May exercised her right to reshuffle or reconstruct her government.¹ The changes were extensive and in some cases surprising. A common theme of contemporary media coverage was May's apparent ruthlessness in sacking a large number of former colleagues. Referencing Harold Macmillan's notorious July 1962 reshuffle, several newspapers christened her changes as 'the day of the long knives' (Ross and Hope, 2016).

This note examines the formation of May's cabinet and the scale of her reconstruction. It first describes her cabinet-level changes before comparing them to those immediately undertaken by other prime ministers who took office mid-way

¹ There is no established academic convention on the use of the terms 'reshuffle' or 'reconstruction' (*cf.* Alt, 1975, pp. 47-50). This note uses the terms interchangeably.

through a parliament.² A prime minister's power to appoint and dismiss ministers is one of the few that is frequently exercised and directly observable. It is also hugely important. Ministerial and especially cabinet-level appointments can affect public policy (Allen and Ward, 2009), not to mention the cohesion, performance and standing of governments (Dewan and Dowding, 2005). They can also tell us something about the variable nature of prime ministerial authority (Heffernan, 2003) and differing prime ministerial styles (Alderman and Cross, 1985; Dowding and McLeay, 2011). In these respects, May's reconstruction demonstrated both the huge potential leeway enjoyed by new prime ministers and a steely willingness on her part to exercise her powers.

May's first cabinet

The right to appoint and dismiss ministers is probably the most important power enjoyed by a British prime minister: it is 'the one that gives by far the greatest leverage over his or her government' (King, 1991, p. 37). The power is especially important for prime ministers who, like Theresa May, come to office without winning a general election and who have been unable to shape their frontbench team in opposition. Reconstructing the government is their first opportunity to do so, as well as to assert their authority and signal a change in regime.

The same power is arguably even more important still for prime ministers who inherit profound policy challenges and divided parties, for they will want their ministers to pull together and collectively make politically difficult decisions. The

² The focus on cabinet-level appointments reflects practical considerations: junior ministerial appointments are generally less significant, and there is usually less information pertaining to them.

situation May inherited was distinctly unpromising in both respects. Her government would need to negotiate withdrawal from the EU and choose whether to pursue ‘soft Brexit’—which would mean accepting some free movement of people in exchange for access to the single market—and ‘hard Brexit’—which would mean insisting on control of national borders and potentially sacrificing access to the single market. It would also have to develop a new economic strategy, one different to that pursued by David Cameron and George Osborne (Gamble, 2015). At the same time, May and her team would need to govern with a small parliamentary majority that included a number of potential rebels. The Conservatives were still divided over Europe—specifically the choice between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ Brexit—and the party was reeling from both a bad-tempered referendum campaign and the fall of a prime minister.

Reshuffles are rarely straightforward. Harold Wilson (1976, p. 34) compared them to ‘a nightmarish multidimensional jigsaw puzzle’. Given her situation, May faced a particularly nightmarish puzzle. Like all prime ministers, she needed to be mindful of the qualities, suitability and utility of individual appointments (King and Allen, 2010). She also needed to be mindful of the cabinet’s overall composition, including its ideological, gender, regional and ethnic balance (see Heppell, 2014); and in her particular case, its members’ positions on Brexit.

May made six appointments on the evening of her entry into 10 Downing Street. The first to be announced were the great offices of state: Philip Hammond replaced the outgoing Osborne as chancellor of the exchequer, Boris Johnson replaced Hammond as foreign secretary, and Amber Rudd took over May’s old job of home secretary (see Table 1). May then confirmed that Michael Fallon would continue as defence secretary. The last two appointments made that evening were new positions

directly linked to Brexit. David Davis was named secretary of state for exiting the European Union, while Liam Fox took the post of international trade secretary.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The remaining cabinet-level appointments were announced the following day. These covered key domestic spending departments, such as health and education, as well as posts such as the leaderships of the House of Commons and House of Lords. The day-two announcements also included five ministers who, though not full cabinet members, were entitled to ‘attend cabinet’.³ Four of these cabinet-level appointments involved no change: Jeremy Hunt was reappointed to health, Jeremy Wright was retained as attorney general, and David Mundell and Alun Cairns remained as the Scottish and Welsh secretaries respectively. Mundell’s reappointment was almost inevitable given his status as Scotland’s only Conservative MP.

May then turned her attention to appointing junior ministers and government whips, a process that took several more days. By the end of it, she had filled nearly 120 posts. In British politics, forming a government is an endurance event performed at the sprint.

May’s new cabinet contained a large number of new faces, most of whom had at least some prior government experience. Boris Johnson was the notable exception. The ambitious former mayor of London and leading Brexit campaigner had been invited by Cameron to attend political cabinets, but was otherwise new to Whitehall.

³ Like much else in British constitutional practice, the distinction between cabinet ‘members’ and ‘attendees’ is ambiguous and open to interpretation. This note adopts an inclusive approach and counts both as cabinet ministers.

Johnson's elevation to foreign secretary was greeted with widespread surprise and disdain (Keate, 2016). He was in disgrace after withdrawing from the Tory leadership contest and seeming to abdicate responsibility for Brexit, and he seemed temperamentally unsuited for the job. Various theories were expounded across mainstream and social media: May was creating a potential scapegoat in case the Brexit negotiations failed; she was trying to neutralise him as a potential rival and keep him away from domestic politics; she was trying to utilise his skills as someone who could sell post-Brexit Britain to the wider world; and/or she was hoping that his appeal among Tories would bolster her government's standing. The truth probably rested in some combination of all these explanations.

Johnson's appointment also serves to highlight the fate of May's other rivals for the Conservative leadership. Four ministers had participated in the contest: Stephen Crabb, Liam Fox, Michael Gove and Andrea Leadsom. May found a place in her cabinet for Fox, who had been eliminated in the first round of voting among MPs, and Leadsom, whose sudden withdrawal after the parliamentary stage of the contest had gifted May the leadership. Crabb was offered a post but chose to quit following allegations about his private life. Only Gove, the former justice secretary and prominent Brexit campaigner, was not offered a job. His behaviour during the leadership contest, when he suddenly turned on Johnson and wrecked the latter's candidacy, had angered many. Indeed, Gove was the second most high-profile casualty of May's reshuffle after Osborne. The former chancellor himself had once been regarded as a possible successor to Cameron, but his stock had dipped after several embarrassing U-turns, and it fell further after he threatened a punitive emergency budget if the country voted for Brexit (Heath, 2016). He chose not to

contest the Tory leadership election. As with Gove, May must have judged that Osborne would bring little to her cabinet table.

Brexit, of course, overshadowed everything. May constructed a slightly more pro-Brexit cabinet compared to her predecessor's. Seven of its 27 attendees, just over one-quarter, had supported leaving the EU (see third column of Table 1). By contrast, only five of the 30 ministers in Cameron's last cabinet, one-sixth, had been pro-Brexit (there had been six until March 2016 when Iain Duncan Smith quit as work and pensions secretary). May increased the proportion of Brexiters in her cabinet by reducing its size and by bringing in Davis, Fox, Johnson, Leadsom and Baroness Evans. Their appointments were compensated for by the sacking of three Brexit-backing cabinet ministers, including Gove. She also retained the pro-Brexit Chris Grayling, who had managed her leadership campaign, and promoted Priti Patel, who had previously attended cabinet, to the post of international development secretary.

Despite being slightly more pro-Brexit, the new cabinet was still markedly unrepresentative of Conservative parliamentary opinion, as was the government as a whole. More than 40% of Tory MPs (138 out of 330) but only 20% of all those initially appointed to a post in May's government (19 out of 93) had backed leaving the EU (BBC News, 2016; Priddy, 2016). However, the three cabinet portfolios directly responsible for delivering Brexit were given to prominent leavers: Davis would now be directly responsible for planning withdrawal from the EU, Fox for Britain's economic future outside of it, and Johnson, as foreign secretary, for representing Britain's interests more generally. Together, these appointments served to underline May's credibility as someone who would respect the referendum result. They also served to emphasise that pro-Brexit ministers now had to 'own' Brexit (Kettle, 2016). In practice, of course, ownership of these portfolios would not give

them control of this policy agenda: May would remain the ultimate arbiter so long as she remained prime minister (King, 1994, p. 211).

A final point worth making about the composition of May's cabinet concerns its gender balance. It was widely briefed ahead of the reshuffle that May intended to appoint more women to high office. In the event, May named seven other women to her cabinet, taking the total to eight. Cameron's last cabinet had only included seven 'members', but it had also included three female ministers who 'attended', thereby taking the total to ten (out of 30) and enabling him to fulfil a pledge to give a third of senior government jobs to women (see Annesley and Gains, 2012). By contrast, there were only eight women among the 27 ministers who attended May's cabinet. While May's record vis-à-vis Cameron can be debated, it stands in marked contrast to Margaret Thatcher's: Britain's first female prime minister only ever appointed one other woman to her cabinet, Baroness Young.

New prime ministers' cabinets

We now turn to the question of how Theresa May's initial reconstruction compares with others in recent history. Since 1945, seven prime ministers took office mid-way through a parliament following the resignation of their predecessor: Sir Anthony Eden, who took over from the aging Sir Winston Churchill; Harold Macmillan, who replaced a sick and broken Eden; Sir Alec Douglas-Home, who replaced an ailing Macmillan; James Callaghan, who succeeded a flagging Harold Wilson; John Major, who took over from Margaret Thatcher; Gordon Brown, who finally achieved his ambition of supplanting Tony Blair; and May, who replaced David Cameron. All seven immediately reshuffled or reconstructed the government. Some change was inevitable, since the new prime minister had left vacant another office by virtue of his

or her accession. But the scale of change has varied considerably, depending on the circumstances and inclination of the new chief.

Table 2 lists the seven post-accession reshuffles that have occurred since 1945. In addition to showing the size of the new prime ministers' cabinets—including all attendees—it also provides four crude indicators for assessing the extent of cabinet-level change. The third column reports the number of ministers in the outgoing prime minister's cabinet that the incoming prime minister chose not to reappoint. For convenience sake, this column is labelled 'dismissals', but the label embraces various forms of more-or-less forced departures from cabinet, including pre-emptive resignations and demotions to junior posts outside cabinet (see Alderman and Cross, 1985, pp. 388–389). This note counts as dismissals those reported by King and Allen (2010), cross-checked with newly available evidence and updated with similarly coded appointments to Eden's, Brown's and May's cabinets.⁴

The fourth column reports a 'political continuity' score, which refers simply to the proportion of all ministers in the new cabinet, including the prime minister, who had attended the previous cabinet. The fifth column reports a 'portfolio continuity' score, which refers to the proportion of ministers in the post-reshuffle cabinet that had attended the previous cabinet and held the same ministerial portfolios. The final column indicates which of the three great offices of state—the chancellor of the exchequer, the foreign secretary and the home secretary—were affected by the reshuffle.

⁴ King and Allen's approach, also employed here, involved the extensive cross-checking of available memoirs, biographies and diaries of ministers and prime ministers, as well as contemporary press coverage. Demotions from full membership of cabinet to 'attending cabinet' status are not counted as dismissals.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Eden, Douglas-Home, Callaghan and Major stand out for having retained a relatively large proportion of their cabinet colleagues after taking office, even if they did not keep them in their previous posts. These four prime ministers' 'political continuity' scores were all around the 80% level, and usually higher. The relevant score for Douglas-Home (78%) would almost certainly have been greater had Iain Macleod and Enoch Powell not refused to serve under him in protest at the manner of his appointment (Lord Home, 1976, p. 185). Among the seven prime ministers, Eden made the fewest changes. He not only retained most of Churchill's ministers when he succeeded him in April 1955, but he also kept the majority of them in their existing jobs. Eden's pursuit of continuity had much to do with his plan to call an immediate general election (Eden, 1960, p. 273). Afterwards, towards the end of the year, he conducted a second, more wide-ranging reshuffle. Major (1999, p. 205) too was mindful of a nearing election when he took office, and consciously avoided 'wholesale changes'. Callaghan, by contrast, potentially had three and a half years before he had to face the country. He therefore took the decision to sack several older ministers (Callaghan, 1987, p. 402). He would go on to conduct several more reshuffles before the 1979 election.

Macmillan's and Brown's initial cabinets had less continuity with their predecessors'. Two-thirds of Eden's final cabinet were appointed to Macmillan's first, whereas 59% of Brown's new cabinet had attended Blair's last. Moreover, both men's initial reshuffles resulted in considerable portfolio discontinuity. Macmillan retained seven ministers (39% of the new cabinet) in their existing posts, whereas Brown kept

just two ministers in their previous jobs, defence secretary, Des Browne, and the chief whip in the Lords, Lord Grocott. Even then, Browne's portfolio was extended to cover Scotland, so the relevant 'portfolio continuity' score (7%) is slightly inflated.

In the case of Macmillan, the high turnover reflected the new prime minister's need to draw a line under the Suez debacle (see Macmillan, 1971, pp. 185-200). He was lucky to inherit two vacancies, and he created further vacancies by sacking five ministers. (Macmillan replaced these seven individuals with six new appointments, thereby reducing slightly the size of the cabinet). In the case of Brown, the high turnover reflected the new prime minister's wish to signal as clean a break as possible with his predecessor (Seldon and Lodge, 2010, p. 5). He was helped by the more or less voluntary decision of three ministers to follow Blair's lead and resign. He dismissed a further seven ministers from cabinet, one of whom accepted a junior post.

The scale of change brought about by May's first reshuffle was similar to Brown's. Just over half of her new cabinet (56%) had attended Cameron's, and only five ministers (19%) retained their previous portfolios (for details, see Table 1 above). May's new government, like Brown's, also saw new faces in all the great offices of state, and, to an even greater extent than Brown, she chose to dismiss erstwhile colleagues from cabinet. Some prime ministers have acquired reputations as good 'butchers', notably Clement Attlee and Macmillan (Dowding and McLeay, 2011, p. 160). May claimed her place among the butchers of Downing Street by demoting six former cabinet colleagues to non-cabinet posts and dispensing entirely with the services of seven others, most notably George Osborne and Michael Gove. The latter simultaneously earned the distinction of becoming the first British cabinet minister in history formally to contest a party leadership election and be sacked immediately by the victorious candidate. Callaghan found places in his cabinet for his five rivals, all

ministers, in the 1976 Labour leadership election; and Major likewise retained Douglas Hurd, one of his two rivals in the 1990 Tory leadership contest (Michael Heseltine, the other, was also given a cabinet job).

May's reshuffle also shared one other characteristic of Brown's not reflected in Table 2: it involved substantial machinery of government changes. The most significant of these were the creation of a new Department of Exiting the European Union, a ministry she had promised during her leadership campaign, and a Department of International Trade. May also merged the old Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Energy and Climate Change into a new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, partly to create space around the cabinet table for the new Brexit-related portfolios.

In one sense, the scale of change and May's willingness to wield the knife reflected her judgement that she could move or dismiss so many, and that she needed to. In another sense, it reflected the actual leeway she inherited upon taking office. Prime ministers' capacity to assert their will waxes and wanes (Heffernan, 2003). May, like Brown in 2007, had convincingly won a leadership election and faced no immediate intra-party challenge. Moreover, her rivals had thoroughly discredited themselves, her party was in disarray, and she offered a seemingly clear response to Brexit. Many Tories probably believed that there was no alternative, at least for the time being. May's freedom to make personnel and organisational changes was thus considerable, and she exploited it the full. Few prime ministers undertake such extensive reconstructions, which are disruptive and potentially risky. But then, few prime minister inherit situations as difficult as those created by Brexit.

Discussion

Theresa May was expected to be a contender to succeed David Cameron when the time came, but she was also expected to face stiffer competition from George Osborne, Boris Johnson and others. Thanks to the Brexit referendum, her path to power proved somewhat easier. Like all new prime ministers, she was bound to make some changes to her cabinet once she took office. In the event, May's initial reshuffle proved to be one of the most extensive in post-war British history.

The scale of May's reconstruction served at least three purposes. First, it signalled a clear break with Cameron and his 'modernisation' project (Kettle, 2016). Second, it demonstrated her acceptance of the referendum result, which she achieved by appointing more Brexiters to the cabinet, and especially to key posts. Third, and related, it served to protect her power base. By bringing Johnson and other high-profile Brexiters into the cabinet, May widened the net of responsibility and reduced the likelihood of being challenged by her party's 'hard Brexit' wing. While ultimate responsibility for delivering Brexit would rest with the prime minister, she would now be able to share some of that responsibility if things went wrong. The downside of making so many changes, of course, was that it involved the sacking of around 20 former ministers. With a narrow parliamentary majority, even a handful of additional malcontents on the backbenches could cause problems.

While the changes revealed much about May's response to Brexit and style of party management, they revealed less about her promise 'to make Britain a country that works for everyone' and her implicit strategy of moving to the centre ground. Partly because of the incoming Brexiters, her cabinet almost certainly became more right-wing than Cameron's (Bale, 2016). That said, her allocation of portfolios seemed designed to keep some of these ministers away from domestic policy: Johnson as foreign secretary, Davis as secretary of state for exiting the EU, Fox as

international trade secretary and Patel as international development secretary would now be preoccupied with different aspects of external affairs.

It remains to be seen if May's government will tack to the centre. It also remains to be seen if party unity can be maintained under the pressures created by Brexit. Finally, it remains to be seen how long May's authority will endure. As other prime ministers have realised, extensive reconstructions and wholesale ministerial butchery can be empowering. Yet, initial demonstrations of ruthlessness are no guarantee for future power. As the case of Gordon Brown demonstrates, prime ministerial authority can soon crumble under the weight of frustrated expectations, stored-up grievances and events.

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TABLE 1: Members and attendees of Theresa May's cabinet, July 2016

Name	Portfolio (new portfolio in italics)	Position on Brexit
Theresa May	Prime minister	Remain
Philip Hammond	Chancellor of the exchequer	Remain
Boris Johnson	Foreign secretary	Leave
Amber Rudd	Home secretary	Remain
Michael Fallon*	Defence	Remain
David Davis	Exiting the European Union	Leave
Liam Fox	International trade	Leave
Jeremy Hunt*	Health	Remain
Elizabeth Truss	Justice	Remain
Justine Greening	Education	Remain
Chris Grayling	Transport	Leave
Damian Green	Work and pensions	Remain
Andrea Leadsom	Environment, food and rural affairs	Leave
Sajid Javid	Communities and local government	Remain
Greg Clark	Business, energy and industrial strategy	Remain
Priti Patel	International development	Leave
Karen Bradley	Culture, media and sport	Remain
James Brokenshire	Northern Ireland	Remain
Alun Cairns*	Wales	Remain
David Mundell*	Scotland	Remain
Baroness Evans	Leader of the Lords	Leave
David Lidington	Leader of the Commons	Remain
Patrick McLoughlin†	Duchy of Lancaster and party chairman	Remain
David Gauke†	Chief secretary to the Treasury	Remain
Ben Gummer†	Cabinet office	Remain
Jeremy Wright*†	Attorney General	Remain
Gavin Williamson†	Chief whip	Remain

Note: The list is based on information reported in Priddy (2016). Ministers' positions on Brexit are derived from BBC News (2016). Names in bold are new cabinet members/attendees. * The named minister held the same job in Cameron's cabinet. † Attending cabinet.

TABLE 2: New prime ministers' first cabinets, 1955-2016

Prime minister	Date	Size of cabinet (all attendees)	'Dismissals'	'Political continuity'	'Portfolio continuity'	Great offices affected
Sir Anthony Eden	Apr 1955	18	1	89%	78%	Foreign secretary*
Harold Macmillan	Jan 1957	18	5	67%	39%	Chancellor* Home secretary
Sir Alec Douglas-Home	Oct 1963	23	0	78%	52%	Foreign secretary*
James Callaghan	Apr 1976	23	4	83%	65%	Foreign secretary*
John Major	Nov 1990	22	2	86%	59%	Chancellor* Home secretary
Gordon Brown	Jun 2007	27	7	59%	7%	Chancellor* Foreign secretary Home secretary
Theresa May	Jul 2016	27	13	56%	19%	Chancellor Foreign secretary Home secretary*

Note: Data are derived from Butler and Butler (2011) and Priddy (2016). Dismissals include demotions to junior posts outside cabinet. * The new prime minister's previous post.