

The optics of a cabinet reshuffle: PR vs reality

*Increasing the number of women in Cabinet is widely perceived as a positive move, and Theresa May's January reshuffle was presented as a bold step to make the government more diverse, writes **Jessica Smith** (Birkbeck). However, it failed to fulfil its own promises, and so missed an opportunity to create significant change in levels of representation at the top.*



Theresa May with her new Whips, January 2018. Picture: [Number 10](#), via [\(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

Reshuffles are a chance to revive the fortunes of a Prime Minister by changing the faces of their Cabinet and government. January's [offered much but delivered less](#); the occupants of key Cabinet positions remained in place after all. May's big beasts stood their ground, seemingly immovable; Justine Greening was the most prominent and the only woman to exit the Cabinet. The optics of Theresa May's reshuffle became, at this point, about increasing diversity. But this neither told the real diversity story of the reshuffle, nor made an adequate case for diversity in the executive. Increasing diversity in their Cabinets appears to be of increasing importance to leaders and has been shown to have beneficial impacts on both [policy outcomes](#) and [political participation](#). However, Theresa May missed her chance to make a lasting impact on diversity at the highest echelons of British government.

The PR

Theresa May overtly framed her reshuffle around the appeal of increasing diversity in her refreshed administration. The image that captured this most explicitly was Theresa May surrounded by an all-female group of government whips. It was [tweeted](#) by Number 10, and the Prime Minister stated she wanted a government that 'looks more like the country it serves'.

These optics are familiar. Remember the '[Downing Street catwalk](#)' in 2014 when David Cameron said he had created a Cabinet that 'looked like modern Britain'? Such repeated imagery shows how gender – i.e. women – is now a salient representational criterion in choosing Cabinets, both descriptively in terms of the numbers of women, and symbolically, for what it 'says' about the Prime Minister, the government and the party of government. This is not unique to the UK. Both [Trudeau](#) and [Macron](#) have made headlines in recent years with their gender parity Cabinets. It suggests that increasing the number of women in Cabinet is regarded as beneficial by political leaders. And rightly so. There is a [strong and positive symbolic impact](#) of having more women, at least in the initial post-election Cabinet. It can 'stand for' a feminist, modern and 'in touch' Prime Minister. A higher proportion of women in Cabinet has also been found to [increase women's conventional political participation](#) – and this effect is stronger than the effect of more women in [Parliament](#).

That said, increasing the numbers of women in government (as in the parliament) does not go uncontested. Positive optics around diversity can lead to a backlash. If the new ‘women Whips’ was the positive image, the negative one was the [Daily Mail’s front page](#) decrying the ‘massacre of the middle-aged men.’

The underlying argument of this headline is the ‘merit’ argument – of course we must have more women in government *but* they must be there on merit alone not as ‘token women’ promoted simply because of their sex nor at the cost of ‘more talented’ men. This is a familiar trope against any equality measures designed to increase the representation of women in politics. However, the gender and politics literature on Parliamentary quotas refutes the bases of this argument. There is [little evidence](#) of any qualification gap between quota and non-quota men and women – less qualified women are not being promoted at the expense of more talented candidates. Moreover, women elected by quotas are as [effective as men](#) once in office. In fact, there is some evidence that quotas can enhance merit as more [qualified candidates](#) are selected.

The reality

If the merit argument has little basis for understanding Cabinet appointments, the ‘demise of the middle-aged man’ was also massively overstated. It was a misrepresentation: it simply didn’t happen. The May optics around diversity do not translate into reality, nor did we end up with a government that ‘looks more like the country it serves.’ After January’s reshuffle, the number of female Cabinet ministers remained the [same at six out of 23](#), although two more women now sit at the Cabinet table (an increase from 8 to 10). At 26% we are far from achieving a gender parity Cabinet as they have in countries like France, Canada, Spain and Chile. May’s Cabinet is little different from David Cameron’s 2014 reshuffle, when only [five out of 17](#) Tory Cabinet members were women, just shy of his [promise](#) of one third of Conservative Cabinet ministers being women.

If we broaden out to the government overall, there is some evidence of positive gender change: the number of women jumped from 19 to 38, out of a total of 120. But as *The Times* [showed](#) this is no more diverse than Gordon Brown’s was when he reshuffled his government 10 years ago. Women now make up 32% of May’s government, compared to 34% of Brown’s; however, Brown’s included seven BME ministers whereas May’s has increased BME representation from five to nine.

Had there been a massacre of white middle-aged men, as the *Daily Mail* suggested, May could have instigated a step change in British politics at Westminster. Karen Beckwith, Susan Franschet, and Claire Annesley in their [research](#) on gender and cabinets have found an informal ‘concrete floor.’ To avoid criticism, succeeding prime ministers or presidents match or surpass the number of women appointed by their successor thus creating a ‘concrete floor’ of a minimum number of women in Cabinet. And these floors are not always set by leftist parties. So, had Theresa May followed through on her rhetoric and appointed a more diverse Cabinet she might have been able to effect change beyond her own administration. Her appointment of junior women does suggest the potential to have some ‘floor’ effect. But this will require a certain steadfastness in the face of the expected backlash from the dinosaurs in British politics and the media.

The article gives the views of the author and not Democratic Audit. It was originally published by the [OUP blog](#).

About the author

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