

The art of the impossible

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Stuck in the middle

The current (re)shuffle is a great example of the limits on power. 'Twas ever thus, you might say, but it's even more true in an era of financial constraint and coalition government. Fine tuning, compromise and caution suit David Cameron's temperament, but perhaps too well for him to be an effective leader.

Journalists are describing today's rearrangement of mainly minor posts in government as 'confused'. But that's probably because it's all been a bit more open than normal and there's no grand theme. Certainly, no major casualties. Don't expect any serious shift to Left or Right, though some high profile specific policies such as airport expansion will be moved on politically.

Most of this is the stuff of Westminster Village gossip: search 'Andrew Mitchell, disciplinarian, cane, public school, Chief Whip'. His appointment will make no direct, immediate impact on the public compared to, say, a Paralympic crowd booing the Chancellor.

The one mildly risky, but in-character move was to bring Jeremy Hunt into Health. The gamble is not getting rid of the hapless Andrew Lansley, but the deployment of someone who was mired in dispute about his relations with News Corporation in his DCMS role. However, Hunt is very much a Cameron ally and while some people find his constant grinning irritating, he's seen by Number 10 as a sympathetic media performer and an intelligent minister.

The trouble for Cameron is not disgruntled sackees, or loose canon like Ken Clarke left to wander the corridors of Whitehall with an ill-defined brief. I think his real problem is his unwillingness to tip the balance. He came back from his hols declaring the end of 'dither' and then puts in place a tepid tweak to his team. That might be entirely sensible according to the textbook for politics as the art of the possible and sensible.

But it isn't going to give him much, if any, political impetus to stretch the bonds that constrain him and his Party's fortunes. How can he change economic policy when the personnel hasn't changed? How can he make significant gifts to his core supporters inside and outside parliament? How can he reposition policy when the proponents of current strategies are still in the driving seat?

Iain Martin points out in [an astute column](#) how standing still can be more dangerous than moving on. Blair and Thatcher may have been just as pragmatic as Cameron in their treatment of colleagues. Their longevity meant reshuffles got harder as their governments wore on. But as Jonathan Powell's [Machiavellian memoir](#) shows, they were prepared to get tough and bruise egos in the search for momentum.

Without wishing to resort to a cheap 50 Shades of Grey metaphor, (too late, 'tis done), I wonder if the Prime Minister is too much in love with the ties that bind?

[Mark Ferguson takes a more partisan view but comes to similar conclusions [here](#)

And [here's an analysis](#) from a right-leaning perspective that argues that the reshuffle will make a difference by the very well briefed former Sun political editor George Pascoe Watson, now in public relations.

Here's [a more right-wing/pro markets perspective](#) from Alistair Heath that agrees with my 'no change' thesis.

[Here's the insider view](#) from an independent right-wing but broadly Cameroonian view, the always insightful Tim Montgomerie who says it was subtle but effective.]

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