

# Corbyn's reshuffle was unnecessary, protracted, and botched – but it may not make any difference

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Jeremy Corbyn's first reshuffle as Leader of the Labour Party has been met with a diverse array of reactions, with some describing his marginalisation of those who had been critical of his leadership as "revenge", while others assert his right to choose whichever team likes. Here, **Alun Wyburn-Powell** uses reshuffle to pursue a broader debate around the merit, or otherwise, of reshuffles. He argues that while the reshuffle was undoubtedly a messy affair, it may not make all that much difference one way or the other in the end.*



Jeremy Corbyn has just made a minor, unnecessary, protracted and botched reshuffle. It has received a huge amount of media coverage. This was quite a perverse feat for a minor opposition reshuffle. Who noticed when Michael Howard or Ed Miliband shuffled his pack? If the reshuffle had not been so over-hyped, slow and clumsy, it would not have received so much attention. As former spin doctor Damian McBride pointed out in his book *Power Trip*, the Blair/Brown feud kept the Labour Party in the media and the Conservatives in the shadows. Corbyn's clumsy reshuffle has kept the Labour Party in the news, raised the profile of some of the key shadow cabinet figures and even increased the name recognition of some barely-known Labour MPs. Corbyn has once again confounded expectations.

Jeremy Corbyn achieved more coverage than the Prime Minister last week, even though David Cameron made the important announcement that his cabinet ministers would be allowed to disagree over the forthcoming EU referendum without having to resign. Maybe the tolerance of dissent in the Labour Party has made it easier for Cameron to allow some open disagreement among the Conservatives. Revealing dissent within political parties is not necessarily a bad thing. If it is not open, then the media will be looking for it anyway and are likely to find (or help to create) it.

So, does the era of open disagreement spell the end of the major political parties or the beginning of a new politics?

Harold Wilson allowed his ministers to disagree during the 1975 EEC referendum. When the referendum was over, the Labour ministers accepted the result and got on with their jobs. However, the Conservatives may find that party unity does not follow the EU referendum, whatever the outcome.

History suggests though that harmony does not always bring rewards at the ballot box or robust and lasting policies. Anthony Eden's loyal cabinet did nothing to prevent the Suez Crisis. John Major's all-male cabinet of chums watched united as the pound was forced from the ERM – although it did bring in the Dangerous Dogs Act and the Cones Hotline. Ted Heath liked to keep his faithful, leak-proof team intact and when he won the 1970 election virtually all his ministers moved into the jobs which they had been shadowing. It worked for one month, until his chancellor, Ian Macleod suddenly died. There was no obvious successor challenging for the job and Macleod's hastily-chosen replacement, Anthony Barber, was not a success.

Successful ministers have emerged from shadows many times and from many parties. Since the devolutions of the 1990s, ten parties have provided ministers for the Westminster, Cardiff, Belfast and Edinburgh administrations. Proving the sceptics wrong, all these parties have managed to field competent ministers.

Jeremy Corbyn's problems in assembling his team echo the difficulties which Ramsay MacDonald had in 1924 to appoint the first ever Labour cabinet. He had a limited pool of talent to fish in and had to include defectors from other parties and members of the House of Lords. However, MacDonald went on to lead a competent, if undramatic, administration which confounded expectations of incompetence or extremism. Relations with Russia did not turn out to be the crucial issue then and attitudes to nuclear weapons are probably not going to be the defining issue now.

It may be wrong to assume that Labour has damaged its prospects by the messy reshuffle, but it may also turn out to be wrong that the Conservatives will benefit from following Labour's example of open dissent. Most of us will never actually know if Trident ever really existed. Europe, on the other hand was definitely still there last time anyone looked.

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