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**Draft Blog on Ministerial Churn**

**Note by Phillip Ward**

**Double Churn for Stable Government?**

It is in the nature of myths that they have the ability to persist long after contradictory evidence should have demolished them. One such is the myth that the coalition government has reduced the churn in ministerial appointments and that the most pressing problem to deal with is the churn in civil servants.

The latter is undoubtedly a concern and, [elsewhere on this website](http://www.bettergovernmentinitiative.co.uk/reports-and-papers/the-deployment-and-development-of-senior-civil-servants/), we offer suggestions for how to calm the pace of senior management change in departments. However, the evidence is that the churn of civil servants is as well as, and not instead of, a churn in Ministers.

The foundation of the myth rests on the fact that David Cameron did not have a discretionary reshuffle in 2011 and that the holders of the central cabinet posts: PM, DPM, Chancellor, Home Secretary and, until the 2014 reshuffle, Foreign Secretary have not changed.

Analysis in the Institute for Government’s [Whitehall Monitor](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/whitehall-monitor-2014), shows that after 2011, David Cameron was very much back in the reshuffle business. He has now made 3 unforced reshuffles in 5 years compared to the 4 made by Tony Blair in his 9 years. (Blair did, however, have a number of forced reshuffles to contend with.)

At Cabinet level the outcome is that six Departments, including the Treasury, have kept the same political leadership, seven have had two Secretaries of State and six have had three. As an aside, these figures seem to pose a problem for those arguing for Ministers to have a direct choice in the appointment of Permanent Secretaries on the grounds that personal chemistry is important.

In the junior ranks the story is worse. Only 19 ministers have lasted the course of the Parliament in their original role. Some “specialist” Ministers, like the Pensions Minister, have kept their posts but the government is now on to its fourth housing Minister.

While this dispels the myth of Ministerial stability, does it matter that the coalition government seems to have behaved much like its predecessors? Arguably it does when this instability in Ministerial appointments it is set alongside the current high levels of churn in the civil service. It is very hard to build effective teams and carry through coherent programmes when hardly anyone that was present at the outset of a project makes it through to implementation. Maintaining a clear vision and delivering effective programmes needs ownership and accountability, which does not exist among transient bit players.

There is another downside to churn among ministers. It nurtures the well-documented culture of Ministers in a hurry. Ministers who know they have maybe one, or at best two, years to make their mark are less likely to welcome policy making that requires extensive research, analysis and consultation. They are more likely to have a bias towards immediate legislation for the profile it gives them within and outside Parliament – whether legislation is needed or not. Even a cursory examination of the impact statements provided for most government Bills shows the most frequent options considered for resolving a problem are “do nothing” or do what the minister has proposed.

Of course there is a role for reshuffles to remove those who are failing, develop those who show promise, and rebalance the collective skills of ministerial teams. One interesting feature of recent reshuffles has been an increase in the number of Ministers with portfolios in more than one department. Little has been said about this development. An assumption might be that it is done to improve co-ordination between important policy areas, which might in the past have been dealt with by larger changes to departmental boundaries. The absence of large scale departmental restructuring is something the Prime Minister can take genuine credit for. But if these shared roles are indeed part of a wider approach to more holistic government, it would be good to see some exposition of that and monitoring of its effectiveness.

The scale of the changes in the 2013 and 2014 reshuffles particularly suggests that the motivation had less to do with genuine “team management” than a more traditional exercise of Prime Ministerial patronage in the interests of party and political management. This aspect of reshuffles is rarely commented on in the press and it is difficult to see how, within our constitutional arrangements, we could get away from it. But the balance between those considerations and having in place a ministerial team with appropriate knowledge, experience and expectation of a tenure long enough to see through key changes needs to be more openly recognised: especially by a Government intent on focusing on delivery by the civil service.

**BGI**

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