

## What do I have to do to get promoted? Tory MPs resent the reduced likelihood of reshuffles and promotions under coalition

**Timothy Heppell** explores the Prime Minister's power to appoint or dismiss parliamentarians from cabinet and suggests that while some backbenchers may be irritated by Cameron's perceived restraint, a reshuffle could permit the Liberal Democrats to renegotiate and improve their portfolio distribution.



The power to appoint and dismiss is one of the most important powers at the disposal of the prime minister. It is through their powers of patronage that they shape, and reshape through reshuffles, their government. It is this power that gives them political leverage and ensures their dominance over their political colleagues. However, there is increasing frustration amongst Conservative MPs, especially the new entrants in 2010, about how David Cameron is using, or rather, not using this power. His failure to advance them is creating resentment. Louise Mensch encapsulated the problem with Cameron's reluctance to reshuffle his ministers when she said: 'what do I have to do to get promoted?'

What are the criteria through which prime ministers decide that some parliamentarians should be ministers and some should not? A good starting point is identifying whether they have the qualities required for ministerial office: are they administratively competent? Can they defend their department in the heat of parliamentary debate? Can they justify their policy choices to the electorate through the media?

These qualifications immediately will discount some backbenches within the governing party, with others discounted due to inappropriateness – e.g. personal behaviour, political attitudes, rebelliousness and disloyalty. From within those who are deemed to be qualified, prime ministers also need to consider certain balances – e.g. regional, gender, age and experience.

The power of patronage is also a key weapon in terms of internal party management and good government. On the latter issue weak, ineffectual and tired ministers need to be removed, to allow regular infusions of new talent to the ministerial ranks. The prospect of loyalty being rewarded with ministerial office is critical. Historically, it is one of the weapons through which the Whips' Office has sought to retain cohesion within the division lobbies – i.e. rebels don't often get ministerial office.

The dynamics of coalition alter these traditional models for explaining ministerial preferment within British government. Cameron has limited his prime ministerial prerogative to make ministerial appointments. Nick Clegg has to be fully consulted on ministerial removals or portfolio re-distributions if a wider ministerial reshuffle is required. The coalition agreement also ensures that Clegg has the right to secure joint agreement with the prime minister regarding the allocation of portfolios between the parties. The lessons from coalition government elsewhere is that the increased risks associated with dual party ministerial reshuffles means that they occur less often than in single party administrations.

For Conservative parliamentarians there are clearly negative impacts in terms of their own career progression. A significant proportion of ambitious Conservative MPs fear that they may fall into the category of parliamentarian that John Major famously dismissed as the never possessed. Cameron has disappointed the following distinct groups within his own parliamentarians but his reluctance to reshuffle:

- First, those who did receive ministerial preferment in May 2010, but at a level lower than they had expected – expectant cabinet ministers found themselves at Minister of State level, and expectant Ministers of States are now Parliamentary Under Secretaries of State.

- Second, those who were expecting ministerial office in May 2010, but instead found that the red boxes that they dreamed of holding were being opened by Liberal Democrats.
- Third, and perhaps most interestingly, coalition is stalling the assumed meteoric career rises of the new entrants of 2010. Many of them will have noted with interest the rapid promotions offered to the likes of David and Ed Miliband or Ed Balls in the New Labour era, all of whom were ministers within a year of entering Parliament. As such new Conservatives would have hoped that preferment would have come their way by 2012.

It is the impact of the second and third categories that has caused Cameron party management problems. Both longer serving and new entrants feel that their future ambitions are being limited by coalition and the lack of a substantive reshuffle since entering power. This frustration is manifesting itself in increased parliamentary rebellion. The rebellion rate in the first eighteen months of the coalition represents the highest rate in the post-war period (43 percent of all divisions involving dissent by coalition backbenchers). Of these the rebellion rate is 31 percent amongst Conservative backbenchers, and 21 percent amongst Liberal Democrats. The coalition rate, and the Conservative rate, is larger than the previous post war high of 28 percent. Cameron's reluctance to engage in a substantive reshuffle will be a contributory factor to the increased rebellion rates.

However, it could be that Cameron does not reshuffle because he is relatively content with the number of Liberal Democrat ministers and where they are located. Nick Clegg is understaffed in the Office of Deputy prime minister; Michael Moore is marginalised in the Scottish Office (which the Liberal Democrats had previously advocated abolishing); and Danny Alexander has shared responsibility for the cuts agenda that the coalition have felt compelled to implement. By placing Chris Huhne (and latterly Ed Davey) in Energy and Climate Change and Vince Cable at Business, Innovation and Skills, leading Liberal Democrats were left to advance causes (the building of new nuclear power stations and increased tuition fees) that made a mockery of the promises they made in the General Election campaign.

The experience of coalitions abroad tells us that the party who lead the department have ownership of that policy agenda. This can be tied into electioneering, allowing smaller parties to claim ownership of specific policies within the coalition. The portfolio allocation that was initially agreed by Cameron ensured that the Liberal Democrats would have little substantive policy achievements to their name. It may irritate Cameron's ambitious backbenchers but a reshuffle would permit the Liberal Democrats to renegotiate on portfolio distribution, and thus limiting reshuffles may be something Conservatives should be relatively comfortable with.

**This is the second in a series of posts by contributors to the recent 'Conservatives in Coalition Government' conference organised by the [Political Studies Association Specialist Group for the study of Conservatives and Conservatism](#) and the [Centre for British Politics at the University of Hull](#). The views expressed are those of the author alone and not those of the Political Studies Association or the University of Hull.**

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