

Welcome to Court of ‘Alexander the Great’ and ‘Rasputin’, but who’s really in Control?

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Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson’s overwhelming victory in the December election has left him in a position where he can expect, certainly for the foreseeable future, absolute compliance from his own MPs. It has to be said that looking at the demeanour and earnest faces of his new intake of MPs reminds one of a gathering of applicants who appear on the gladiatorial television programme *The Apprentice*.

Cabinet reshuffles are an opportunity for any PM to put their imprimatur on the sort of administration they wish to be responsible for as leader. It allows any PM to select those MPs they believe can be trusted to carry out the promises made in the election manifesto and, of course, reject those considered to be under performing or, worse, disloyal.

Last Thursday’s changes were expected to be relatively unexciting in that the names of those being jettisoned had been in the public realm for a number of weeks. Though most who were ‘sacked’ – it is worth pointing out that normal employment rules do not apply to those who are Cabinet Ministers – few are tears are ever shed for them.

There are, of course, occasional exceptions. Julian Smith, who was sacked as Northern Ireland Secretary, a post often seen as a political equivalent of being banished to Siberia, was one such example. Smith was widely respected as capable, caring, non-partisan and interested in detail; skills not always apparent in his predecessors.

Whether Julian Smith’s replacement, Brandon Lewis, will prove as capable as him remains to be seen. Nonetheless, getting rid of Smith, whose greatest sin would appear to have been publicly cautioning against a hard Brexit in terms of its impact on NI, was roundly

condemned by politicians in Westminster, Ireland, north and south of the border, and in Europe. Given the tragedy of Northern Ireland, it would be sincerely hoped that PMs chose the NI Secretary with the greatest of care.

As some observers of the first meeting of the new cabinet last week point out, Lewis was as far away from the PM as possible. As website Slugger O'Toole suggested, "Perhaps it was a metaphor for Northern Ireland's lack of significance in Westminster now that Stormont is back at work and Brexit has been ticked off as 'done'."

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Curiously, Brandon Lewis appears also to be a 'marked man'. This is because of his role as Conservative Party Chair when he investigated Johnson over his comments made in *The Telegraph* that Muslim women wearing burkas looked like "letter boxes" or "bank robbers". Though Johnson was cleared of breaking his party's rules of conduct, he was asked by Lewis to apologise.

It's rumoured that Lewis' role has not been forgotten by Johnson, a man who is notorious for bearing grudges against those seen as having transgressed him. It's speculated that Lewis, who after becoming Chair of the Conservative Party and Minister without portfolio in a reshuffle under Theresa May in January 2018, was appointed Minister of State for Security and Deputy for EU Exit when Johnson became PM last July.

The perceived wisdom is that though Johnson would like to have simply got rid of Lewis from the cabinet entirely, this might be seen as being ungracious and born of still bearing a grudge. Instead he's being moved out in a series of steps.

All of this might seem like the normal cut and thrust of politics. However, what seems increasingly apparent to even the most casual observer is that Johnson is a PM who carries out politics in a way that is utterly dedicated to his aggrandisement and that contrary to the age-old adage of being 'First among equals', under his leadership, he is emperor of all he surveys.

Johnson's power is absolute, or is it?

All political leaders have advisors who, usually unelected, are appointed to provide counsel on the basis of what is good for their boss as their own success (and ultimate fate) will be inextricably linked. In Johnson's case his closest and most trusted advisor is Dominic Cummings who has been compared to Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin (usually known only by his surname), who was a Russian mystic and, through his friendship with the family of Emperor Nicholas II, the last monarch of Russia, exercised considerable influence in the latter stages of imperial Russia.

Cummings, who has been a controversial and confrontational figure in the Conservative Party since acting as a Special Advisor to Michael Gove and was one of the key individuals behind the leave campaign, is now believed to be at the heart of all major decisions taken by PM Johnson. His role in creating the basis for December's victory for Johnson by such a whopping majority, on the basis of the simplistic and vaguely imbecilic slogan of getting Brexit "done" means that his power is as phenomenal as his boss.

Some would argue that because Johnson is seen as highly intelligent but something of a political gadfly without the sort of unshakable convictions and ideology that characterised former leader and political titan Margaret Thatcher, he needs Cummings to provide the bedrock for his thinking. Indeed, as critics of Johnson have long argued, his desire to engage in showmanship and be seen as the bringer of good news – and someone who instinctively avoids conflict with others – means he needs an enforcer; a role Cummings is extremely happy to fulfil.

Which brings us back to last week's reshuffle.

Without any doubt the dominant story of Chancellor Sajid Javid's shock resignation due to his refusal to countenance Johnson's demand that he sack his own team of advisors and instead work with officials appointed by No 10. Had Javid accepted such a condition the consequence would effectively mean that his authority would have been more fatally undermined than it was already believed to have been.

As a document on the official government website, *Prime Ministers and their Chancellors*, states without equivocation, "The connection

between the prime minister and chancellor of the exchequer is probably the most problematic of all ministerial relationships. Foreign secretaries and home secretaries... rarely have the capacity that a chancellor does to define, or indeed, destabilise a premiership.”

It's reported that in recent months some journalists were being briefed by 'insiders' at No 10 that Javid was considered as a 'Chino'; Chancellor in name only.

What seems abundantly clear is that in the powerplay between the PM and, of course, Cummings and Chancellor Javid, there was a great deal of argument about how to deliver the promises made in the election and since about rebalancing the economy. No 10 wants to deliver what might be considered 'instant pudding' in spending in regions and through dedicating money to departments in a way that will provide improvement to disadvantage and inequality made considerably worse by the austerity policies implemented under the coalition government led by David Cameron and his chancellor George Osborne.

Javid intrinsically believed in maintenance of existing financial rules that increased spending through borrowing should only be for sound investment would have created conflict with No 10. It's well known that Javid and Cummings clashed. The attempt to gain control over the treasury by installing officials appointed by No 10 was always going to be a Rubicon that Javid would find extremely difficult to cross (or stomach).

Much attention has been given to how much more compliant the relatively inexperienced former Chief Secretary to the Treasury and No 10 favourite, Rishi Sunak, who worked with Javid, will be. Being aware of fate that befalls those who refuse to obey Cummings or fall out with Johnson, Sunak will do what is required.

Increased spending by the Chancellor in March's budget is, because of what seems like perennially low interest rates, makes this perfectly possible. However, as Director of the Institute for Financial Studies, Paul Johnson, argued in [*The Times*](#), that this will eventually result in the need to repay through increased taxes. Worse, there could be more austerity though this is most definitely not something PM

Johnson would remotely consider lest it lose support among those who 'lent' him their votes in December.

Sunak, ambitious as he may be having been an MP only since 2015 having been selected as prospective candidate for Richmond (Yorks) to succeed former child prodigy Conservative leader and foreign secretary William Hague, may decide that Johnson cannot afford to lose another chancellor so quickly and become his own man and resist being a stooge/'Chino', though this would do his long-term ambitions to succeed Johnson as PM no harm, in the current climate, and especially given Javid's fate, it would be a somewhat dangerous strategy.

Will Javid, freed of constraints of being a minister of state and with no obvious return, especially with so many others willing to do whatever it takes to achieve high office, become an irritant on the backbenches? That said, others who having been treated similarly, and have told it like it is have had no effect on Johnson who seems to have a kryptonite-like defence to allegations of wrongdoing.

Time will tell.

All of the excitement that accompanied Brexit no longer takes place in the House of Commons but as part of the circus that follows Johnson/Cummings. The matter of Brexit will reignite once negotiations of the free trade agreement commence. The news that the UK "won't budge" on its unwillingness to comply with EU rules according to Brexit negotiator David Frost means that we should expect a long summer that will be characterised by strident positions and harsh words from both sides.

In the meantime, Cummings and Johnson should be aware that the Conservative Party has no compunction about getting rid of those it considers a liability. Crucially, they will both be aware of the fate of Rasputin, who in December 1916 was assassinated by conservative noblemen and Emperor Nicholas II, the last monarch and Tsar who, together with his family, was executed by the Bolsheviks in July 1918.

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807