

Cabinet reshuffle takes UK closer to exit from European Union

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The British media have largely portrayed UK Prime Minister David Cameron's cabinet reshuffle as cleaning the "barnacles off the boat" in order to ready the Conservative Party for next May's General Election.

The 40 new appointments, including the promotion of 10 women, were described as necessary for the party to detoxify its brand and project an image of "Modern Britain".

This is window dressing for a further shift to the right, as Cameron attempts to woo back disaffected Tory voters that have deserted to the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) by taking a tougher line on reform of the European Union (EU).

The most significant change was the resignation of Foreign Secretary William Hague on the eve of the reshuffle. Publicly, it is claimed that Hague took the decision for personal reasons. He will stay in cabinet as Leader of the Commons until the May 2015 General Election.

Whatever the truth of Hague's decision, many commentators had expressed dissatisfaction with his performance at the Foreign Office.

When he took office in 2010, in the aftermath of the disastrous interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hague had declared, "The British retreat is over and now the advance will begin." Instead, British foreign policy became mired in a similarly catastrophic intervention in Libya, the parliamentary defeat of Western plans—supported by London—for a military assault on Syria, and the advances of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) into key areas of Iraq and Syria.

In the face of a mounting crisis of British imperialism, Hague could state only that the UK would send "technical" assistance to Iraq and was "not planning a military intervention in this situation."

Seemingly reduced to the sidelines of major international events, Hague's decision to spend his time hobnobbing with actress Angelina Jolie in her campaign to reduce sex crimes during wars was also seen by some as disturbing evidence that Britain has been reduced to a "soft power" and has no foreign policy worthy of the name.

No one is claiming that Philip Hammond, Hague's replacement at the Foreign Office, brings anything different to the table as regards the Middle East. What his appointment does do is send a signal that the government's foreign policy priorities are focussed on "recalibrating" Britain's relationship with the European Union.

With substantial recent electoral losses to UKIP, Cameron had pledged he would hold a referendum on British membership in 2017 if the Tories return to government in 2015. In the meantime, he said he would seek to renegotiate Britain's terms of membership so as to avoid an EU exit, which is opposed by Washington and significant sections of big business.

It is a measure of how anti-EU the Tories are becoming that Hague—an arch-Thatcherite who was long considered one of the most eurosceptic ministers in government—is now regarded as too conciliatory on Europe and even as a "restraining influence on the neo-conservative elements within the Conservative Party." While Hague advocated Britain being "in Europe not run by Europe", a growing number in the party want out of Europe. The appointment of Hammond, who has said he would be prepared to vote for a British exit, is aimed at appealing to these layers by hardening the government's negotiating stance in the EU.

So too is the promotion of Michael Fallon as defence secretary, who has also stated publicly that a British exit from the EU may be necessary.

Also out of government are Kenneth Clarke and Dominic Grieve. Clarke, who held leading ministerial posts under Margaret Thatcher and was minister without portfolio under Cameron, is the standard-bearer of Tory pro-Europeans. Along with Grieve, who was ousted as attorney general in the reshuffle, he has been a vocal opponent of Tory threats to opt out of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

The “repatriation” of human rights powers from Strasbourg is a main demand of the Tory right, which presents this as a means of strengthening “law and order” and anti-immigrant measures. Cameron had promised to repeal the European Human Rights Act at the Tory conference in October, but had reportedly run into opposition from Clarke and Grieve. Clarke had described it as “personally unthinkable” to leave the ECHR, which was “drafted by British lawyers after the second world war to protect the values we fought the war for.”

With them out of the way, it appears likely that repeal of the ECHR will be a major commitment in the Tory General Election manifesto.

The appointments will lead to further tensions between Britain and its EU partners. It is no coincidence that the reshuffle took place the same day the European Parliament approved Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the European Commission (EC).

Cameron had vowed to defeat his appointment, with the British media portraying the former Luxembourg Prime Minister as an unreconstructed social democrat, intent on overriding national sovereignty—and an alcoholic to boot. In reality, Juncker is as much a banker’s man as Cameron is, but with the difference that the new EC president is more inclined to place the interests of European banks above those of the City of London.

Cameron’s failure to block Juncker underscores the sharpening and ultimately irreconcilable national antagonisms within Europe that place the future of the EU in question. In his speech to the European Parliament following his appointment, Juncker set out plans for closer EU integration. The measures, which include the harmonisation of corporate tax rates, integration of capital markets, and a new financial transaction tax, will further enrage eurosceptics.

The prime minister has nominated Lord Jonathan Hill as the UK’s next EU commissioner. A relative

unknown, he was selected so that the Conservatives could avoid a by-election that might see them lose out to UKIP. According to the BBC, Tory MPs said Hill was “eurosceptic enough to satisfy them but not so eurosceptic that he might be vetoed by the European Parliament.”

Speaking yesterday, Fallon boasted that Cameron had put together a “Eurosceptic cabinet” to win back “people who may have flirted with UKIP.”

The prime minister is now in the situation that he has taken Britain one step closer to exit from the EU, with major political and economic ramifications but has done nothing to resolve the divisions in his own party.

His decision to demote Michael Gove from education secretary to chief whip is a case in point. Gove had led the drive for so-called “Free Schools”, attacking teachers and demanding restrictions on their right to strike. Popularly despised, it was his public conflict with other cabinet ministers that reportedly sealed his fate.

Sections of the Tory right, however, are up in arms at the decision, along with the dismissal of Environment Secretary Owen Paterson and Welsh Secretary David Jones—the only two cabinet ministers to vote against same-sex marriage.

Writing in the right-wing *Spectator* magazine, Charles Moore thundered that the reshuffle “emboldens all those pressure groups who hate the Tories”, and had “also target-bombed his party’s natural supporters — rural voters, Eurosceptics, non-greens and people who are out of sympathy with his metropolitan preoccupations,” while at the *Daily Mail*, Max Hastings rued that “The Prime Minister has done a bad day’s work, and will surely live to regret it.”



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