

MONITOR

STOP PRESS: THE CABINET RESHUFFLE

The main text of the Monitor went to press before the Cabinet reshuffle on 5 May. This had a number of implications for some of the key players responsible for constitutional matters. In particular

- Jack Straw leaves the Foreign Office to become Leader of the House of Commons, where he will also lead on Lords reform and party funding
- John Prescott remains deputy Prime Minister, and will chair cabinet committees, but loses his departmental responsibilities
- Ruth Kelly becomes head of the new Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the successor department to ODPM
- Douglas Alexander becomes Secretary of State for Scotland, as well as Transport, succeeding Alistair Darling
- John Reid becomes Home Secretary, following the removal of Charles Clarke.

Remaining in their previous posts are

- Lord Falconer, who remains Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, and Lord Chancellor
- Peter Hain, who remains Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and for Wales.

Jack Straw will thus play a key role in two of the most live areas of constitutional policy in the remainder of Blair's premiership, reform of the House of Lords and state funding of political parties. Staff from the Constitution Directorate of the DCA will support

him in this role, and a small DCA team are supporting Sir Hayden Phillips' review of party funding. To further strengthen his role, Jack Straw will also chair the Constitutional Affairs and Legislative Programme Committees of Cabinet, previously chaired by John Prescott. Straw is a strong supporter of an all-appointed House of Lords, as was John Prescott. He remains fourth in the Cabinet rank order, after Blair, Prescott and Brown.

Ruth Kelly's new Department of Communities and Local Government finally resolves the conundrum of who is to be the sponsor department for the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR), which goes live in 2007. DCLG is an expanded department with a new remit to promote community cohesion and equality, as well as ODPM's responsibilities for housing, urban regeneration, planning, and regional and local government. It takes in the communities and civic renewal functions of the Home Office, and brings together responsibility for equality policy, including policy on race, faith, gender and sexual orientation. The Women and Equality Unit moves to DCLG from DTI, and DCLG is to be the sponsor department for the new CEHR.

Peter Hain has two substantial items of business under way - the attempt to revive the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, with a deadline of 24 November; and the new Government of Wales Bill which has passed the Commons and is presently before the House of Lords. Both these should be completed by the late autumn, and the comments of the Prime Minister's spokesman implied that a move might be on the cards after that.

Douglas Alexander's appointment illustrates a problem of Cabinet-making forced on the Prime Minister by his decision not to have a single 'Secretary

of State for Devolution'. This means there has to be a Cabinet-level Secretary of State for Scotland, who combines the post with another portfolio. That portfolio has to be a domestic one, but not one of the most demanding ones (so the Home Office is probably out). This increasingly narrows the number of portfolios available, and (at least under Labour) means that a Scottish MP has to occupy one of them.

John Reid's appointment to the Home Office caused some discussion in the press of whether it was appropriate for a Scotsman to be appointed to a predominantly 'English' department. But with its responsibilities for immigration and citizenship, and for anti-terrorism the Home Office has extensive UK-wide functions in addition to its responsibilities for the criminal justice system and prisons in England and Wales.

The remit of the Constitutional Affairs Committee now chaired by Jack Straw includes devolution, as the Devolution Policy committee was wound up in 2005. This means that there are now five Cabinet ministers (Falconer, Hain, Alexander, Kelly and now Jack Straw) with an interest in devolution. The 'centre' of government concerned with devolution remains badly fragmented. Lord Falconer remains responsible for overall strategy on devolution, but the policy lead remains with the territorial secretaries of state.

The Constitution Unit
UCL Department of Political Science
Director: Professor Robert Hazell
www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit
Email: constitution@ucl.ac.uk
Phone: +44 (0) 20 7679 4977
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7679 4978