

# Tories come full circle as Cameron returns to the fold

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Rishi Sunak has carried out a wide-ranging Cabinet reshuffle, in an attempt to unite his top team as he prepares to contest the next general election. The centrepiece of the reshuffle is the return of former Prime Minister David Cameron as Foreign Secretary, a move that sent shockwaves across British politics, bringing back memories of Peter Mandelson's return in the final years of New Labour.

Sacking Suella Braverman as Home Secretary came as less of a surprise. Her response to the pro-Palestine demonstrations managed to offend every interested party, and culminated in ugly scenes on Armistice Day as far-right agitators clashed with police, while widespread instances of anti-Semitism and pro-Hamas sentiment marred the otherwise peaceful pro-Palestine march. The Metropolitan Police's condemnation of her words perhaps tipped the balance for the Prime Minister.

A number of Conservative MPs told EGA that Braverman's stoking of tension ahead of what is meant to be a solemn and dignified weekend was the final straw. Whether Sunak personally agreed with Braverman's views on policing and her wider critique of 'multiculturalism', her tendency to pick fights, and her barely-disguised leadership ambitions presented a mounting challenge to his authority, and ultimately outweighed the benefits of having her and her faction of the party 'in the tent'.

With Cameron's return and Braverman's sacking, the Tories have come full circle. Cameron won the Party leadership in 2005, promising to lead the Tories back to power after three election defeats which many blamed on the right-wing of the Party. After winning two elections himself, his departure in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum saw the Party undergo a number of reinventions. This began with Theresa May's stubborn indecision, followed by Johnsonian populism, and went on to Trussite economic libertarianism; even Sunak himself used his Conference speech last month to portray himself as an agent of change, a break from '30 years of failed consensus'.

This reshuffle suggests that just six weeks later, Sunak and his team have dropped that ambition in favour of a more orthodox 'One Nation' approach. Of course, much has changed since Cameron was in Downing Street – not least a party that is now broadly united when it comes to EU membership. However, despite winning the so-called 'Red Wall' in 2019, it appears Conservative strategists will now adopt a more defensive approach to the upcoming election, and protect their historic 'Blue Wall' heartlands, which are vulnerable to the Liberal Democrats.

Cameron's return is therefore less likely to significantly alter UK foreign policy, and is much more about domestic politics. As someone who did particularly well with Tory-Lib Dem swing voters, the hope is that his presence in government will signal to these southern affluent voters that they and their interests and values are now back at the top of the party's agenda. With this said, the Conservative 2019 intake – already likely feeling snubbed by Cameron's return – will view with suspicion the appointment of such an openly pro-China figure to the Foreign Office brief, especially as his position in the Lords will mean they cannot scrutinise him themselves.

## *Key Cabinet appointments*

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- **James Cleverly** has been appointed Home Secretary, replacing the thorn in Sunak's side that was Suella Braverman.
- Newly ennobled former Prime Minister **David Cameron** has been appointed Foreign Secretary, in a move nobody in Westminster foresaw.
- **Steve Barclay** has replaced Therese Coffey at DEFRA. Barclay's views on the environment are not especially well-known, as he has been curtailed from speaking publicly throughout his long service as a Minister. With this said, Coffey's poll ratings with the public and with party members are very poor, so we should expect to see a significant change of approach to environment policy.
- **Victoria Atkins'** appointment as Health Secretary is evidence of the element of the Party that Sunak has decided to favour in his reshuffle. A One Nation Tory, Atkins will bring what many see as moderate, compassionate conservatism to government.
- The appointment of **Laura Trott** to Chief Secretary to the Treasury should be seen as a continuation of the work Sunak started when he promoted Claire Coutinho to Cabinet: the ascendancy of moderate, 2019-intake Conservatives in Blue Wall seats.
- It has fallen to **Richard Holden** to be the face of the Conservative Party as Party Chairman, replacing Greg Hands. Following last month's dismal by-election results, it was difficult to see how Hands could continue.
- **John Glen** has been appointed Paymaster General, with Jeremy Quin heading to the backbenches. A close ally of Sunak, Glen's new role at the Cabinet Office will be seen as a shoring up of the Government's core.

## *Why has Sunak done this, and what does it mean?*

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It is clear that the Prime Minister's latest attempt at a reset – just over a month ago, at Conservative Party Conference – did not go according to plan. With little discernible change in the polls, and with few voters viewing him as the 'change candidate' he claimed to be, today's reshuffle was another attempt to seize the political narrative.

The catalyst for today's reorganisation was the unsustainable pressure on the Prime Minister over Suella Braverman. Her presence in his first Cabinet was, by all credible accounts, the result of a deal with the right of his party in order to secure his place as leader at a time when this was still in the balance. There was broad consensus that he had to sack her and in doing so, assert his authority: how he has chosen to do that will be more divisive. With the right of the party feeling like they have been purged, it remains to be seen how much trouble Braverman causes Sunak from the back benches.

It has been over a year since Sunak entered Downing Street. He attempted with his first Cabinet to be all things to all men, and try to restrain the demons which the EU referendum and Johnson's premiership unleashed within the Conservative Party.

Sunak has been walking the tightrope between those two warring factions ever since, but today's reshuffle represents a Prime Minister making a choice; in making it, he has given us perhaps the clearest indication yet on how he wants to govern.

With the surprise appointment of Cameron and the promotions of MPs like Victoria Atkins and Laura Trott, this reshuffle can be seen as a victory for the One Nation wing of the Conservative Party. We should consequently expect less engagement in ‘culture wars’ and ‘wedge-issues’, as well as a less binary approach to the UK’s members of the European Convention on Human Rights – an issue made all the more important with the Supreme Court’s impending decision on the legality of the Rwanda scheme on Wednesday.

In the aftermath of the 2019 General Election result, many commentators were questioning whether the Tories could hold onto the Red Wall, which it won in large part thanks to a departure from Cameronite austerity: in the time that has since passed, the question is now whether it even wants to, or if it will pivot back to its Blue Wall heartlands.

It remains to be seen how the right-wing of the Conservative Party reacts to the reshuffle. EGA hears talk of meetings already taking place in Westminster to discuss how to respond to what some are going as far as to suggest has been a coup – will these MPs go as far as to submit letters of no confidence in the Prime Minister? Or will they let him own the moment, and then point back to today’s events as the reason for which the Conservative Party lost the election?

### *Cameron: Back to the Future*

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Westminster has been treated to that rarest of things in British politics: a genuine surprise. David Cameron’s return to front-line politics stunned SW1; from Brexit to economic policy and national security, successive Tory Prime Ministers have defined themselves against his record. Only last month Sunak claimed to be breaking with ‘30 years of failed status quo’, even scrapping the remainder of HS2, a flagship Cameron-government infrastructure project. Cameron described it as the loss of “a once-in-a-generation opportunity”.

The newly ennobled Lord Cameron will bring much-needed experience to the Cabinet. Some argue that the appointment of a heavy-hitter will bolster the UK’s international credibility, although there is nuance here; that credibility arguably declined as a result of the upheaval which followed the EU referendum which Cameron himself called. Across the Atlantic, Cameron’s inability to overcome his adversaries on Syria, as well as his cosy relationship with China, will be instantly remembered.

Cameron has made clear that his return is motivated by determination for public service, as he seeks to aid a ‘strong and capable Prime Minister’ in Rishi Sunak, and help him prepare for the coming general election. In his first-ever Secretary of State role, he will be dealing with a complex matrix of challenges – some with their roots in his premiership – from implementing the Windsor Framework and resolving tensions with the EU, to dialogue with China on AI. With that said, such policies may be more effectively delivered with Cameron’s diplomatic approach than they would have been under a Liz Truss or Boris Johnson government.

### *Reactions from SW1*

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The reaction writes itself for the Opposition, with their main theme one of bewilderment and bemusement at the actions of a Prime Minister who just six weeks ago declared himself the man to bring about a departure from the status quo. Pat McFadden, Labour’s campaign chief, said: “A few weeks ago, Rishi Sunak said David Cameron was part of a failed status quo, now he’s bringing him back as his life raft. This puts to bed the Prime Minister’s laughable claim to offer change from thirteen years of Tory failure.”

Conservative reactions have been more mixed than their Labour counterparts. One former Cabinet Minister told EGA that today's reshuffle represents 'a return to sensible government – at long last', but another much longer-serving Cabinet Minister simply texted 'it's surely over now.'

### *The final word*

Regardless of political persuasion, Rishi Sunak has surprised almost everyone with his choices of appointment today. Not usually seen as politically creative, today represents a genuine attempt at seizing the political narrative and getting people talking about him and his intentions in government. In this regard, it has been a successful exercise: commentators have stopped talking about his former Home Secretary and started asking one another what Sunak's new Cabinet will mean for the country, which is exactly what he will be wanting them to do.

Whether or not he meets with success in the delivery of good, stable government remains to be seen, but it is clear that today's reshuffle is the culmination of much introspection as he tries to address the most pressing question of his premiership: can he win the election?

### *Appendix: Sunak's new Cabinet*

<b>Brief</b>	<b>Minister</b>
Prime Minister	Rishi Sunak
Deputy Prime Minister	Oliver Dowden
Chancellor of the Exchequer	Jeremy Hunt
Foreign Secretary	Lord Cameron
Home Secretary	James Cleverly
Defence	Grant Shapps
Justice	Alex Chalk
Energy Security and Net Zero	Claire Coutinho
Science, Innovation and Technology	Michelle Donelan
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities	Michael Gove
Health and Social Care	Victoria Atkins
Leader of the Commons	Penny Mordaunt
Leader of the Lords	Lord True
Business and Trade	Kemi Badenoch
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Steve Barclay
Work and Pensions	Mel Stride
Education	Gillian Keegan
Transport	Mark Harper
Culture, Media and Sport	Lucy Frazer
Conservative Party Chair	Ric Holden
Northern Ireland	Chris Heaton-Harris
Scotland	Alistair Jack
Wales	David TC Davies
Chief Whip	Simon Hart
Chief Secretary to the Treasury	Laura Trott
Attorney General	Victoria Prentis
Paymaster General	John Glen
Immigration Minister (Home Office)	Robert Jenrick
Security Minister (Home Office)	Tom Tugendhat
Development Minister (FCDO)	Andrew Mitchell
Veterans Minister (Cabinet Office)	Johnny Mercer
Common Sense Tsar (Cabinet Office)	Esther McVey