

Doing the Whitehall shuffle

WITH CABINET RESHUFFLES, IT IS always a case of dealer's choice. But no prime minister in living memory has scooped up the departmental deck and dealt it out again with quite the regularity of Tony Blair. Whereas Margaret Thatcher and John Major were fond of switching ministers around depending on the rise or fall in their political fortunes, Blair has orchestrated three major carve-ups of entire ministries in his first five years in power – the latest coming after Stephen Byers' resignation.

Construction is no stranger to reshuffles, of course, among both firms and their representative bodies – the latest is next month's break-up of the Constructors Liaison Group. But industry leaders do believe they have suffered unduly from Blair's interminable rounds of political poker. Key areas of policy such as transport, safety, environment – even construction itself – have all been swapped between departments at least once under Labour; often as part of the reshaping of a whole department. As Graham Watts, chief executive of the Construction Industry Council, observes: "There's been four different name plates on Eland House – the DoE, the DETR, the DTLR, and now the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. It must have cost them a fortune."

To give a some historical perspective on the latest efforts to find the right administrative arrangements for transport and the built environment, here is guide to the past 22 years of Whitehall reshuffles.

👉 Roger Humber on Lord Rooker page 31

pre-1997



DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT



JOHN GUMMER

Nice and easy: John has everything but ...

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT



MALCOLM RIFKIND

... transport. That's Malcolm's



1997



DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS



JOHN PRESCOTT

Welcome to the Ministry for Everything



2001


DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY



PATRICIA HEWITT

Construction joins the rest of UK industry ...

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT, LOCAL GOV. AND THE REGIONS



STEPHEN BYERS

... but Stephen hangs on to what's left ...



DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, FARMING AND RURAL AFFAIRS



MARGARET BECKETT

... except for green policy, which goes to Margaret

2002

DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY



PATRICIA HEWITT

No change here ...

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER



JOHN PRESCOTT

... but he's back ...

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT



ALISTAIR DARLING

... minus the transport, of course ...

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, FARMING AND RURAL AFFAIRS



MARGARET BECKETT

... and the green stuff. Simple, eh?

The way we were

The Department of the Environment's soon-to-be-demolished headquarters on Marsham Street was not the most successful symbol of the government's commitment to the urban fabric of the nation. But though ministers refused to tear down the towers, at least they left the DoE itself intact. The DoE was formed in 1970 by Edward Heath out of three ministries: public building and works, housing, and transport.

Harold Wilson later reflected that, had he been re-elected, Labour would have done the same thing.

There seemed an enduring logic in keeping all construction-related matters – including industry sponsorship, planning, and urban regeneration – under the same (leaky) roof. The only troublesome area was transport, which was taken out of the DoE by Jim Callaghan in 1976, and shifted in and out of the

Cabinet under Margaret Thatcher. The transport secretary's job was also something of an ejector seat – the Tories had eight over one 10-year period.

The monster

It was described as a superministry, or a sop to John Prescott, depending on your politics. But the industry generally agreed that the formation of the monolithic Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions upon Labour's election in May 1997 made sense. It gave construction a powerful voice in Cabinet as well as its best-ever construction minister in Nick Raynsford. It also promoted joined-up

government by enabling civil servants with interrelated responsibilities to work in close physical proximity.

Despite the success of the 1998 Egan review, though, industry leaders reflect that Prescott eventually struggled to represent such a vast area of policy within Cabinet. Blair was also stung by environmentalist George Monbiot's view that the DETR's sponsorship of construction

made it impossible to be impartial on planning decisions.

The diaspora

After John Prescott's empire went the way of all others in history, construction was moved to the DTI, much to the delight of the manufacturers. Others were less happy that Raynsford's successor as construction minister, Brian Wilson, already had a bulging portfolio as industry and energy minister. It was the first time construction had been deprived of a dedicated minister since 1962.

But the real horror lay in the way in which Blair, the great champion of joined-up government, fragmented all the other construction-related activities. Margaret Beckett's new environment department dealt with green policy, but transport, planning and building regulations – vital for sustainability – came under Stephen Byers at the equally nascent DTLR.

As for Raynsford, he now worked for Byers, but bizarrely kept control of

construction safety. And the Treasury took charge of procurement issues – except those relating to architecture or Blair's drive to improve public buildings, which came under the aegis of Tessa Jowell's culture department. Even Jim Hacker couldn't have made it up.

Where are we now?

Byers' resignation triggered yet another revamp of Whitehall – widely seen as an admission that last year's fragmentation has failed. Prescott reclaims housing and urban regeneration, under a new Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. "Unbelievably egotistical," says Graham Watts of the Construction Industry Council.

Prescott is supported by Lord Rooker, who succeeds Lord Falconer as housing and planning minister. Many in construction will miss Falconer, who was shaking up the planning system. Mike Haslam, president of the Royal Town Planning

Institute, muses that his switch to the Home Office "might be an excuse to ratchet down the green paper". Others fear that hopes that a planning bill will be included in the next Queen's Speech, have been dashed. Mark Price, head of public affairs at the House Builders Federation, says: "We don't want a hiatus while a new minister of state takes a fresh look at planning."

Transport, meanwhile, gets its own department for the first time under Labour. The main concern is whether Alistair Darling, the former pensions minister who succeeds the beleaguered Byers as secretary of

state, will review the 10-year transport plan, which has been challenged by both the transport select committee and the CIC.

"We don't want a new plan," stresses Michael Ankersa, chief executive of the Construction Products Association. "If there is a new one then you will totally confuse the industry."

Another concern is that construction safety will slip down the government's agenda now that it falls under the transport umbrella. "There's no logic or sense to put safety with transport, other than satisfying public opinion," says Watts.