



# Cabinet resignations

**Emma Kilheney** looks into two recent resignations from May's cabinet

In November 2017 prime minister Theresa May was forced to reshuffle her cabinet following the resignation of two ministers within 1 week.

## First resignation

Defence secretary Michael Fallon resigned on 1 November after admitting that his behaviour towards women had fallen 'below the high standards' required. He had been accused of inappropriately touching a number of journalists and making unsuitable comments to Andrea Leadsom in cabinet meetings.

Fallon was replaced by former chief whip Gavin Williamson, who has only been an MP since 2010. A close ally of May, he led her campaign to become prime minister in 2016 and backed the 'remain' side of the EU referendum campaign. He attended a comprehensive school in Scarborough and his appointment continues May's preference for non-privately educated MPs — her cabinet features the lowest number of such MPs since 1945. Williamson has little defence experience. His priorities are national security and a continued focus on countering so-called Islamic State.

Julian Smith, Williamson's deputy, replaced him as chief whip and Esther McVey was appointed deputy chief whip.

## Second resignation

One week after Fallon's resignation Priti Patel, the international development secretary, resigned from her post after mounting pressure on her to do so. While in Israel on a private trip over the summer, Patel had engaged in 12 meetings with top Israeli politicians including the prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. She failed to disclose these meetings to the prime minister or the Foreign Office, breaking ministerial rules. Patel had discussed using UK foreign aid to assist the Israeli army in carrying out 'humanitarian aid' in the Golan Heights. May told Patel that she was right to resign and emphasised that relations between the UK and Israel must be done formally and through official channels.

Patel was replaced by Penny Mordaunt, who had been tipped a few days earlier as a replacement for Michael Fallon. Mordaunt, who like Williamson was only elected as an MP in 2010, was promoted from her post as minister for disabled people. Unlike Williamson, she supports Brexit and she backed Andrea Leadsom, not Theresa May, in the 2016 Conservative leadership campaign. Her appointment ensured that the balance of 'remain' and 'leave' supporters in the cabinet remained unchanged. Mordaunt's new appointment means that Sarah Newton MP has become minister for disabled people, and Victoria Atkins has replaced Newton as a junior minister in the Home Office.

Table 1 Cabinet resignations since 2010

Name	Cabinet position	Date of resignation	Reason for resignation	Replacement
Priti Patel	International development secretary	8 November 2017	Personal misconduct — broke the ministerial code by failing to disclose meetings.	Penny Mordaunt
Sir Michael Fallon	Defence secretary	1 November 2017	Personal misconduct — inappropriate behaviour towards women.	Gavin Williamson
Iain Duncan Smith	Work and pensions secretary	28 March 2016	Disagreed with the government about cuts to disability benefits.	Stephen Crabb
Maria Miller	Culture secretary	9 April 2014	Personal misconduct – expenses scandal relating to funding a home for her parents at the taxpayers' expense.	Sajid Javid
Lord Strathclyde	Leader of the House of Lords	7 January 2013	Wanted to pursue other career interests.	Lord Hill of Oareford
Andrew Mitchell	Chief whip	20 October 2012	Personal misconduct — allegedly called a Downing Street policeman a 'pleb'.	Sir George Young
Chris Huhne	Energy secretary	3 February 2012	Personal misconduct — charged with perverting the course of justice after getting his wife to take his speeding points to avoid a driving ban.	Ed Davey
Liam Fox	Defence secretary	14 October 2011	Personal misconduct — broke the ministerial code by allowing his advisor into defence meetings.	Philip Hammond
David Laws	Chief secretary to the Treasury	29 May 2010	Personal misconduct — expenses scandal relating to rent payments made to his partner.	Danny Alexander

## Another resignation to come?

Damian Green, first secretary of state and May's deputy, is another potential cabinet casualty after pornography was alleged to have been found by police on his parliamentary laptop in 2008. Green is also being investigated after being accused of inappropriately touching and texting a party activist in 2015.

## Why do cabinet ministers resign?

Individual ministerial responsibility is the convention that every minister should be responsible for all the activities of their department and their conduct. They

must expect to receive criticism from parliament and select committees. They must resign if necessary over departmental failures, political errors or personal misconduct. Although ministers do not always resign, most do so to save the whole government from embarrassment. Only the prime minister can remove individual ministers from office — only the prime minister can do so.

### Questions

- 1 Why were the recent cabinet resignations particularly problematic for Theresa May's government?
- 2 Do you think that the doctrine of individual responsibility helps or hinders the UK system of government?

### Weblinks to follow up

Find out more about the movement of ministers during the coalition: <http://tinyurl.com/ya956gaf> and during the Blair and Major governments: <http://tinyurl.com/y9unsnd9>

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