

Reshuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic

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7/18/2014

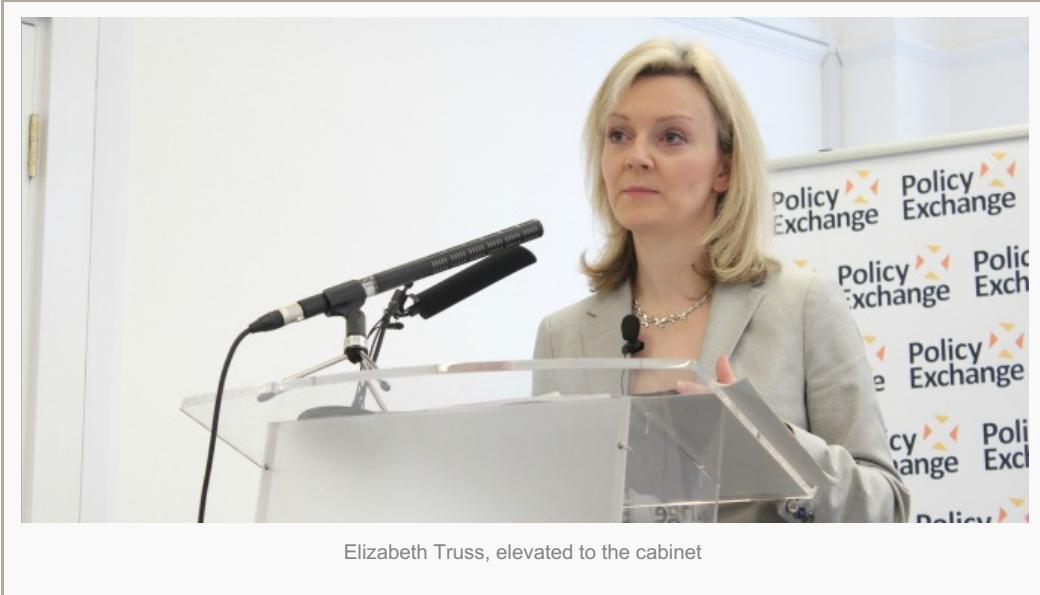
Mary Evans looks at the cabinet reshuffle and writes that it is shows the Conservatives' complete contempt for the intelligence of the electorate, not least if they assume women will be reassured by a couple of new female faces.

It may be because its summer time and the weather is warm, but it is difficult to find the latest cabinet reshuffle even slightly exciting. The sense of re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic hangs over much of mainstream Westminster politics these days and this present event does not suggest that much is being done to make those same deck chairs more available to different kinds of passengers.



The big story the newspapers and the web tells us is that two more women have been promoted to full membership of the Cabinet and that to make these posts available men have either been demoted or are set to leave politics at the end of this parliament. (Indeed, it is striking how many of the men who are leaving high office have declared that they will not be standing as MPs at the next general election). So before we start hanging out the flags for the onward march of women it is perhaps useful to note this and ask if at least some of the passengers are in fact making an early bid for the life boats.

In the case of the two women who have been promoted to full membership of the cabinet I would argue that there are quite – if not very – important reasons to question whether their biological sex matters one jot to anyone who is not a biological fundamentalist. It is their politics that matter. In the case of Elizabeth Truss (appointed as Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) it is important to remember that this woman wrote a book called *Britannia Unchained* in which she asserted, against all evidence to the contrary, that 'the British are amongst the worst idlers in the world'. One way, she suggested, to change this calamitous, if fictional, state of affairs was to extend the de-regulation of legislation governing labour law. It may be the case that when Ms Truss realises the full extent of the brutal hours of her new post that she will temper this view and take a more sympathetic attitude to those who work very long hours. It is to be hoped that this will occur and that she will not be seduced by the passing whiff of power into believing that her new life on the hamster's wheel of politics constitutes socially valuable work. She might like to read the diaries of that archetypically 'unmodern' High Tory, Alan Clark, to garner some sense of the largely pointless tasks that lie before her. Clark, bemoaning the time that he spent reading endless documents – and recognising that his father had spent much of his life in exactly the same way – did pause to reflect on the distinction between work that made a difference and work that actually mattered not a jot.



The other woman now admitted to the Cabinet, Nicky Morgan, has taken Michael Gove's job as Education Secretary and is, at the same time, Minister for Women and Equalities. This has to be what feminists have long described as the 'double shift', work paid and unpaid. But in giving a woman this double shift what we have is the continuation of that quite extraordinary situation where women and equalities become special subjects: in what sense, and in which world, do women exist where men and inequality do not? The acceptance of this double burden by Nicky Morgan is all the more surprising since she has been a determined opponent of same sex marriage, on the grounds that for her a marriage cannot be anything except a relationship between a man and a woman.

In articulating her resistance to same sex marriage Nicky Morgan argued that (according to the BBC website) 'there have been lots of little changes down the years but what's never changed is the fact that marriage is between a man and a woman'. Now those 'little changes' may refer to the considerable range of legal powers that husbands had over their wives or the acceptance of the virtual ownership of children by their fathers. But it is the word 'little' that suggests an interesting mindset in which we are invited to consider the idea that institutions (such as marriage – or even, for example, the institutions of government) have some kind of 'pure' form which persists despite changes that some people might regard as fundamental. The idea is important because it seems to abolish – more or less at a stroke – any acceptance or consideration of the idea that the presence of more women in government (be it in the cabinet or wherever else) might make a significant difference. In fact, if we think that this is a 'little' change and that the really crucial issue is the continued existence of the cabinet and/or cabinet government, then the importance of the presence of more women can be regarded as of little importance.

Here we might also consider the possibility that Nicky Morgan has actually articulated exactly what a great many people in the Conservative Party (and indeed in other power structures) think: that these structures are so powerful, so all transforming to the people within them, that those already holding power within them are perfectly confident of retaining power and exercising it in whatever way best fits their purposes. The purpose of the Conservative Party at the moment is to convince the electorate that it should have an overall majority in the next parliament. If it is assumed that two more women in the cabinet will achieve this then we could draw a number of conclusions about this Party's thinking: a complete contempt for the intelligence of the electorate, not least in the assumption that women – disproportionately affected in negative ways by the policies of the coalition government – will be reassured by a couple of new female faces and the absolute assurance that the presence of the 'new' women will make no difference at all.

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