

U.K. Cabinet Reshuffle a Blow to Boris Johnson's Global Ambitions

The prime minister reassigned the foreign minister, Dominic Raab, after the messy exit from Afghanistan, a setback for a government seeking a greater role on the world stage.



By Mark Landler and Stephen Castle

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LONDON — Prime Minister Boris Johnson demoted his foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, on Wednesday in a sweeping cabinet shake-up that made Britain's chief diplomat a highly visible casualty of the West's chaotic exit from Afghanistan.

Mr. Raab, who moves to the less prestigious post of justice secretary, never recovered from a hail of criticism after he stayed on vacation in Crete even as the Taliban were sweeping into Kabul, the Afghan capital. His performance became emblematic of a foreign policy that critics said threatens to consign Britain to a diminished role on the world stage.

Mr. Johnson softened the blow by naming Mr. Raab deputy prime minister, a largely symbolic role that was vacant and often goes unfilled. He was replaced as foreign secretary by Liz Truss, a rising star in Mr. Johnson's Conservative Party who, as secretary for international trade, won praise for negotiating a post-Brexit trade deal with Australia.

Moving aggressively to revitalize a government whose popularity appears to be waning, Mr. Johnson also dismissed three other ministers: Robert Buckland, the justice secretary; Gavin Williamson, the education secretary; and Robert Jenrick, the housing, communities and local government secretary.

The changes give Mr. Johnson the chance to reshape the top echelons of his government before a Conservative Party conference next month, at which he will try to chart a clearer post-Covid policy agenda. Among the vexing questions is Britain's place in the world, which took a hit in the frantic retreat from Afghanistan last month.

Mr. Johnson's government seemed almost absent in the early days of the crisis, in part because Mr. Raab was away at a Mediterranean beach resort. While he insisted he was monitoring events from there, reports that he had delegated a critical phone call to a subordinate fueled complaints that Mr. Raab was asleep at the wheel.

It was a striking reversal of fortune for Mr. Raab, a lawyer and ardent Brexit supporter, who earned praise for his steadiness last year when he stepped in to chair cabinet meetings after Mr. Johnson was hospitalized with Covid-19.

Mr. Raab tried to repair the damage after the withdrawal, making a high-profile trip to Qatar, where many evacuees had been taken. He spoke of the need to ensure safe passage of British citizens and Afghan allies and called for engagement with the Taliban, even as he said there was no short-term prospect of Britain recognizing their government.

By then, however, his reputation had suffered a major blow. Rumors in the corridors of Whitehall mainly concerned who might replace him as foreign secretary, one of four "great offices of state," along with prime minister, chancellor of the Exchequer and home secretary.

Mr. Raab's American counterpart, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, has also come under political pressure over his handling of Afghanistan. Several Republicans have demanded his resignation, and he faced tough questioning from Republicans in testimony before Congress this week.

But Mr. Blinken has something that Mr. Raab does not — a close relationship with his boss. Mr. Blinken has been a longtime foreign policy adviser to President Biden, while Mr. Raab challenged Mr. Johnson for the leadership of the Conservative Party in 2019. His elevation to the Cabinet was mostly a reward for his Brexit credentials, which made him popular with that wing of the party.

“He was a natural fall guy when the prime minister decided someone had to carry the can for the government's muddled and ineffectual response to the Afghan crisis,” said Peter Westmacott, a former British ambassador to the United States.

While it was Mr. Raab who took the fall on Wednesday, his travails were a setback for Mr. Johnson as well. For a prime minister eager to showcase a new “Global Britain,” Afghanistan was a humbling episode. Mr. Biden, officials said, did not consult Mr. Johnson in advance about the timing or logistics of the evacuation, even though Britain was the second-largest contributor of troops to the war among NATO members, after the United States.

Britain found itself scrambling to organize flights for its diplomats, aid workers and Afghan allies. Critics of Mr. Johnson, including in his own party, questioned why Britain did not work with other NATO members to mitigate the chaos that erupted after Mr. Biden announced the Aug. 31 withdrawal.

“We boast about Global Britain, but where is Global Britain on the streets of Kabul?” Mr. Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, said in a biting address in Parliament last month. “What does it say about NATO if we are entirely dependent on a unilateral decision taken by the United States?”

American officials countered that all NATO members were consulted and had “signed up” to the withdrawal, a position echoed by the alliance's secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg. But feelings toward Mr. Biden remain raw among some in the Johnson government and in the Conservative-leaning press.

Since his landslide general election victory in December 2019, Mr. Johnson has made few changes to his cabinet, of which the most notable came in February 2020, when Sajid Javid resigned as chancellor after refusing to accept curbs on his right to hire his own advisers.

Mr. Javid's job went to Rishi Sunak, who has emerged as a leading figure in the government and a potential successor to Mr. Johnson. However, Mr. Javid returned to the cabinet earlier this year as health secretary when his predecessor, Matt Hancock, was forced to resign from that post in June.

Mr. Johnson, some critics said, has never been intent on assembling the strongest cabinet for fear he might be outshone. That, critics say, has contributed to a lack of clarity over his main domestic promise of “leveling up,” which refers to delivering prosperity to economically deprived regions.

Mr. Williamson, as education secretary, had faced fierce criticism for presiding over a crisis in schools examination results last year. Mr. Jenrick, as housing secretary, faced criticism after approving a property project involving a Conservative Party donor; he was also in charge of a proposed loosening of house-building restrictions in England that was unpopular among some Conservative lawmakers.

To replace Mr. Jenrick, Mr. Johnson chose Michael Gove, a longtime colleague with whom he has had a complicated, often rivalrous relationship.

Jill Rutter, a senior fellow at UK in a Changing Europe, a research institute, said Mr. Johnson may have trimmed his cabinet of some underperforming ministers, but he had not widened the net to bring in any heavyweight figures from the backbenches who had opposed him or Brexit.

“This is still a Brexit-supporting loyalist cabinet,” Ms. Rutter said, adding that those who had been promoted, like Ms. Truss, were also largely politicians who were popular among Conservative Party members.

The most interesting appointment was that of Mr. Gove, she said, because in addition to housing secretary, which is key to bringing coherence to Mr. Johnson’s ill-defined plans for ‘leveling up” prosperity to less economically developed regions, he also retained responsibility for forging policies to keep together the United Kingdom.

“Beyond Brexit, the prime minister will be judged in 2023 or 2024 on progress in leveling up,” Ms. Rutter said, referring to the next general election. “You could say that he has subcontracted to Michael Gove some of the things that will decide his fate.”

Mark Landler is the London bureau chief. In 27 years at The Times, he has been bureau chief in Hong Kong and Frankfurt, White House correspondent, diplomatic correspondent, European economic correspondent, and a business reporter in New York. @MarkLandler

Stephen Castle is London correspondent, writing widely about Britain, including the country’s politics and relationship with Europe.
@_StephenCastle • Facebook

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