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**Scottish
Government
reshuffle**

Alex Salmond's first reshuffle

After 22 months in power, the First Minister has today announced his first reshuffle. The Scottish Cabinet remains intact, as it contains the First Minister's closest political allies, but the perceived weaker performers in the ministerial team dropped out to be replaced by three strong Parliamentarians, two of whom have not always been "on message" with Mr Salmond in the past.

- **Mike Russell** moves from Environment Minister to Culture to replace Linda Fabiani,
- **Roseanna Cunningham** enters as Environment Minister,
- **Alex Neil** replaces Stewart Maxwell as Communities Minister, and
- **Keith Brown** succeeds Maureen Watt as Schools Minister.

The fact that today's announcement came as a surprise to many illustrates the SNP's approach to Government, which so far has been one of cohesion and closed ranks, with all troops on side and discipline on the backbenches.

This strategy has worked well so far and allowed the Government to sail through more difficult times recently. The SNP had started its time in administration in May 2007 with a string of good news stories, such as abolishing bridge tolls, scrapping tuition fees, and averting hospital closures, but over the last six months the Government has felt the limitations of its powers, be it over the budget negotiations, the continuing problems with the Scottish Futures Trust, the Presiding Officer's inquiry into the veracity of Ministers' statements, the proposed local income tax, and controversial forthcoming legislative proposals over alcohol and compensation.

Today's announcement makes for interesting politics, but what does it mean in terms of policy? Very little, probably. As any leader, Alex Salmond just wants to make sure he has the best people in his team, while sending a strong signal that underperforming Ministers will be shown the door, but with all Cabinet Secretaries still in place the main direction of the Government is likely to stay the same.

The new faces

Mike Russell, Minister for Europe, External Affairs & Culture – Admittedly, he's anything but a newcomer. He's been a prominent figure within the party for over 20 years, and described by some as a no-nonsense intellectual who is not afraid to speak his mind. His relationship with Alex Salmond used to be strained after he stood against him in the leadership election and disagreed with him over the party's independence strategy, but the First Minister has recognised the important role he's been playing as Environment Minister, and his new role will allow him to play the bugle of the Homecoming Scotland theme, one of the Government's flagship policies, as well as look after constitutional matters, including the preparations for an independence referendum and the current debate on the Parliament's borrowing powers. His media background will also be important as the debates over broadcasting and newspaper ownership continue. Mike Russell takes over from Linda Fabiani, who struggled with her portfolio, in particular as she failed to get the Government's Creative (Scotland) Bill over the first financial hurdle.

Roseanna Cunningham, Minister for Environment – An experienced backbencher, advocate and former MP, Roseanna's well respected across the parties for her professional approach as Convener of the Environment & Rural Affairs Committee. She also stood against Alex Salmond in the 2006 leadership election, and was subsequently relegated to the backbenches. But the First Minister must have recognised the talent and experience she could bring to the Government table and decided to give her the environment remit which follows naturally from her committee role which held her Ministerial predecessor and Cabinet Secretary to account.

Alex Neil, Minister for Communities - Probably the biggest surprise of today's announcement. He's become an invaluable player for the First Minister on the backbenches where he's worked hard over the past two years to fend off any opposition attacks, and testing water for new Government policies. With his new Ministerial responsibility, he may however have to change his approach as he's not known for keeping his opinion to himself, as his opposition to the creation of Lloyds Banking Group showed. As one of the fiercest opponents to PPP, and his strong criticism of the financial services sector, Alex's appointment will make for interesting reading, in particular in terms of the Government's housing policy which falls within his remit. Mr Neil has not challenged Mr Salmond himself, but stood against his preferred choice of John Swinney for the party leadership, so is a third Minister with a party as well as a politically independent streak.

Keith Brown, Minister for Schools – The only 'real' new face on the Government table was first elected to the Scottish Parliament in May 2007, but has won admiration as a capable performer, and is

considered a leadership loyalist who has been groomed for Ministerial office. The MSP for Ochil takes over from Maureen Watt who struggled to make an impact as Minister in the chamber and in the media, and recent reports on poor literacy standards probably haven't helped her fortunes. It is hoped that Keith, a Falklands veteran, will deliver a stronger parliamentary and political performance, based on his experience as leader of Clackmannanshire Council and convener of Holyrood's Standards Committee which reprimanded Labour's Wendy Alexander last year.

One other notable aspect of his reshuffle is that while the retiring Ministers are considered to have enjoyed mixed fortunes, none of their departures can be claimed as a scalp by the Opposition parties as a result of holding them to account in the debating chamber. Food for thought all round.

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