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Science vs Government: The ultimate game of chess

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There seems to be a terrible vacuum in media coverage of the chaotic reshuffling of ministers in our new government. The positions of Higher Education Minister and Science Minister attracted scant

attention in media announcements so far, and even today there is confusion about where exactly lies the responsibility for science. The power struggle between No 10, the science establishment and a new science minister in the middle begins. It may resemble a giant game of chess with adversaries facing off across a board made up of pieces that are universities and vested interests. The end might be stalemate but the hope is a win-win outcome will prevail.

Times Higher Education (THE) has done very well in being vigilant in their coverage of the issue. On Friday, they revealed '[Michelle Donelan named universities minister as science split off](#)'. Then today they

further reported that '[Universities fear loss of policy focus as ministerial roles split](#)' It seems that the new science minister is to be lower ranked parliamentary undersecretary (PUS), [Amanda Solloway](#) in the [Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy](#). However, even THE admits this is still not confirmed. As an aside, [Lord Callanan](#) is also a PUS in the same department and has a degree in Electrical and Electronic Engineering from the Newcastle Polytechnic (now University of Northumbria) and a background in brewing.

One wonders what is going on. A clue may be speculation from Jonathan Woodhead, policy adviser at Birkbeck, University of London. He said to THE the new PUS "*might give more of an emphasis on the potential ARPA-type ideas that Dominic Cummings has been coming out with*". Then again, he observes that "*in a sense [science has] got its voice in the heart of government already*". The implication is that Dominic Cummings is calling the shots.

The new ministers and a fairer deal.

It is hoped that Amanda Solloway will work closely with her colleague Michelle Donelan who represents Universities at the Department for Education. Donelan is a History and Politics graduate from the University of York and she neatly replaces Chris Skidmore, an Oxford graduate in History. This, therefore, signals little change in perceptions of university apart from her experience of the world outside of 'Oxbridge'. However, she will need to pick up a fast pace set by Skidmore as he travelled widely around the HE system. In doing this, it is hoped that she will work closely with her counterpart in Science to develop a funding policy that ensures better science training in our universities and fair access for everyone to succeed.

In contrast, the challenge for Amanda Solloway is much greater. It is strange that she was chosen for this position out the fifty-seven potential candidates with some STEM background (see the list compiled by the [Campaign for Science and Engineering](#)). She appears to have had no experience of university life or a science background as noted on her own [www site](#) or the [Wiki entry](#). It seems that she left school to enter the world of work. She has acquired considerable experience in retail management and as an HR specialist for two major

charities. Her co-authored book '[Emotional Intelligence: Activities for Developing You and Your Business](#)' from 2009 provides greater insight into her expertise. It may be that she will need to deploy those skills in what could be the most difficult of circumstances.

The massive challenge for a Science Minister.

This resides in the complex structure of science advice gathered for government to digest. As a result, there are many competing influences. Her first challenge will be her boss at the [Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy \(BEIS\)](#) [Alok Sharma](#). It looks as if he will take on the climate change brief since he will chair the Glasgow COP26 climate summit in November. Although his primary work experience is in accountancy and banking, he is also a graduate in Applied Physics from the University of Salford.

After that comes the expert advisory channels that operate around the government. Firstly, there is [Patrick Vallance as Chief Scientific Advisor](#). He leads the [Government Office for Science](#) that is based in the BEIS. BEIS, in turn, funds research at universities through [UK Research and Innovation \(UKRI\)](#). Its Chief Executive, [Mark Walport](#) has a very large network of scientists in the various research councils to call upon. He can also deploy the checks and balances of rules in the complex [governance structure](#) between UKRI and BEIS.

Patrick Vallance has many others to call upon. He also coordinates a network of [chief scientific advisors](#) that are spread across many government departments. The advice from these can be deployed easily. Add to this his role in chairing another body of advisors in the [Council for Science and Technology](#) and the network widens dramatically. This body sits somewhat separately from the government, and it is composed of some very influential and powerful figures. Its eighteen-strong [membership](#) includes the President of the Royal Society, President of the British Academy, President of the Academy of Medical Sciences, President of the Royal Academy of Engineering and, of course, Mark Walport for good measure.

Dealing with No 10.

If the above wasn't confusing enough, there is still the potential for significant conflict with the advisors at No 10. The science PUS could find herself trapped in the middle. The lead is being taken by Dominic Cummings whose views on government and science are raising alarm bells. He is prolific in his views through the medium of his [blog](#). This must be read to be believed and the science leaders in government noted above will certainly have done so. TEFS has reviewed some of the dangers of the Cummings approach in January with '[Social Mobility positions available: Only "Super-talented weirdos" need apply](#)'. Add to this the precipitous danger of relying on formulating science policy based on selective and skewed popular science. This is explored further by TEFS on 10th January 2020 with '[Genetics, Intelligence, Social Mobility and Chinese Whispers](#)'. For example, the Cummings take on intelligence and its genetic basis is superficial and based upon the popular text '[Blueprint: How DNA makes us how we are](#)' by behavioural psychologist Robert Plomin. But he is getting the ear of government at the highest level. This has led him to appoint recently another advisor and fellow believer in Andrew Sabisky. His offerings are astounding and should be read as a warning to all concerned. Qualified in Educational Psychology, he has ploughed through many disciplines with enthusiasm. This enthusiasm as a 'super influencer' encompasses theology, intelligence, race and eugenics. So much so that [Wiki is considering deletion of his entry](#). However, fierce adverse media coverage of his views got there first. It has forced him to resign as reported by the BBC this evening '[Andrew Sabisky: No 10 adviser resigns over alleged race comments](#)'. The fact that vigilance by the press was needed to counter a very dangerous and malign 'pseudoscientific' influence illustrates how vulnerable the government has become.

Big science is lurking around the corner.

Aside from being continually distracted by 'weirdos' and poorly thought out scientific ideas, the new PUS will be assaulted with a plan for very big science. No 10 has plans to increase science funding for emerging fields of research and technology through an initiative similar to that of the US [Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency \(DARPA\)](#). Originally laid out in the [Queen's Speech](#) in October as a new "*funding agency*" it was [announced by the outgoing Science minister](#) in

October and may be called the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). The result will be a fierce 'feeding frenzy' by the major research universities. They will deploy all the influence they can muster through the numerous routes to the top. Suggestions will be made for setting up a 'National Centre in X'. Then will come the bright idea that their university is the best placed to house all work in X. Be warned.

Caught in the middle.

The Science PUS will be caught in the middle and bombarded by competing interests. Maybe No 10 thinks she will channel their pet interests into reality. Then again, she might set about using her expertise in 'emotional intelligence'. If my experience of science in the UK is anything to go by, she will come across levels of ruthless guile, arrogance and even deceit that go well beyond her experience to date. However, if she brings the various factions together, then there is a chance of success. In bringing scientists and engineers of different disciplines together from across many countries, I found that ensuring only the win-win outcome works. It might end in stalemate, but everyone must gain something in the end. I'm sure she already knows that.

Mike Larkin, retired from Queen's University Belfast after 37 years teaching Microbiology, Biochemistry and Genetics