

NEWS IN FOCUS

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UK prime minister Theresa May meets astronaut Tim Peake, days after taking up her new post.

POLITICS

New Brexit government spells shake-up for science

Theresa May promotes a former science minister and abolishes climate-change department.

BY DAVIDE CASTELVECCHI

Three weeks after UK voters chose to leave the European Union, the country has a new prime minister, Theresa May — and a revamped administration that is poised to change science's place in government.

An overall atmosphere of chaos has reigned since the referendum, and May's ascendance has brought a measure of stability. Notably for

researchers, she announced on 16 July that the universities and science minister Jo Johnson would continue in his role.

But since she took charge, May has also shaken up the government in ways that affect researchers. On 15 July, she created a new department by merging two existing ones — the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), which had overseen the United Kingdom's annual £4.7-billion (US\$6.3-billion)

research budget, and the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC). And she appointed Greg Clark, a former science minister, to lead the new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

Science-policy experts welcome the appointment of Clark. "People will be happy that he has played that role in the past and understands the importance of science and of the research system," says Kieron Flanagan, ►

▶ a science-policy researcher at the Alliance Manchester Business School.

It is less clear what the abolition of DECC will mean for climate research and policy, and some fear it will weaken the United Kingdom's responsibilities on climate change. "DECC's disappearance raises urgent questions," said Angus MacNeil, who leads the cross-parliamentary Energy and Climate Change Committee.

Bob Ward, a climate-change policy expert at the London School of Economics and Political Science, warns against jumping to the conclusion that May will be timid on climate action. "From what we know of her statements on climate change, she understands the importance of it," he says. "I don't think the fact that there is no climate change in the title necessarily means a reduction in commitment."

A more consequential change will come if some of the civil servants who are experts on climate change are lost in the transition. DECC's staff understood not only climate science but also its effects on regional weather and the need for UK infrastructure to adapt, says Corinne Le Quéré, director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of East Anglia in Norwich.

May's own recent rival for the prime minister position, Andrea Leadsom, is the new environment secretary, and May has moved responsibilities for higher education from BIS to the education department, which is now under Justine Greening.

As a result, Johnson's brief will now be split between the education department and BEIS. Universities and schools are very different, notes Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute in Oxford. But, he adds, the reorganization could work provided Johnson has "considerable autonomy" within the education department. Importantly, Johnson's reappointment signals that May plans to push on with reforms of higher education and of research funding begun by her predecessor, David Cameron.

STABILITY, FOR NOW

May's appointment of Philip Hammond as Chancellor of the Exchequer, a job that includes overseeing the state's budget



Former science minister Greg Clark leads a newly created department.

including allocations to research, is expected to provide stability, too. "He is seen as being a person who doesn't make headline decisions, so we might have some hope of status quo at the very least with regard to research funding," says Jenny Rohn, who chairs the UK lobby group Science is Vital.

But the country still faces the uncertainty of Brexit. May, who became the United Kingdom's second female prime minister on 13 July, had opposed leaving the EU, like Cameron. But she has made it clear that under her watch, the United Kingdom will leave the EU, and has sought to differentiate herself from Cameron's government. She has sacked some of its key members, and filled some posts with pro-Brexit politicians, putting Boris Johnson, the pro-Leave former mayor of London, in charge of the Foreign Office, for example. She has also created a post for leading the negotiations that will determine the United Kingdom's new relations with the EU.

Scientists are still in the dark about how May herself views science. She ran virtually no formal campaign for prime minister and has given little indication of what her policy priorities on research would be. In a speech in Birmingham

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on 11 July, she called for "a better research and development policy that helps firms to make the right investment decisions" and "an energy policy that emphasizes the reliability of supply and lower costs for users", but did not go into further detail.

NEIL HALL/REUTERS

PRAGMATIC OPERATOR

In her former role as home secretary, May's push to reduce immigration and tighten up visa requirements sometimes put her at odds with university administrators. She also helped to push through a bill that enacted a blanket prohibition on so-called designer drugs. But she has shown pragmatism and a willingness to change her mind when presented with compelling evidence, says Paul Nightingale, deputy director of the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex.

"She has been an example of good practice in gathering evidence, and also of explaining her decisions when they have not gone with the scientific advice," says Sarah Main, director of the London-based Campaign for Science and Engineering.

May's past decisions do not necessarily give a good indication of how she will act as prime minister, Flanagan says. As a home secretary positioning herself to be the next prime minister, May had to seem tough on issues such as immigration and security, he says.

Central to scientists' concerns are the terms of the Brexit negotiation. In particular, they want reassurance that they will still be able to access EU science funding and to easily hire people from throughout the bloc. "We need to make sure people understand that, perhaps unintentionally, the UK research community does have a lot to lose," says Main.

The community is anxious for the government to commit to shielding them from the possible impacts of Brexit. "The challenge would be for the new government and the new prime minister to set out clearly what is their ambition for science and research to play a part in the UK future," Main says. "We would like to see that clearly stated." ■

Additional reporting by Richard Van Noorden and Elizabeth Gibney.

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