

No, minister

An infrastructure minister would have much to offer, but problems of rivalry and influence may be insurmountable

One pre-election rumour doing the rounds concerned the creation of an infrastructure minister. Although it seems to have got lost in the post-election wheeling and dealing, the post could yet appear in a future reshuffle. Despite the massive public deficit, the government still needs to invest in infrastructure – and a dedicated minister could offer better co-ordination.

Many believe it would give infrastructure advocates greater power in Westminster. “A dedicated infrastructure minister [would be] a good thing because it means there is someone there to champion the infrastructure sector, perhaps reducing the number of cuts in that sector,” says Laughlan Waterston of lenders SMBC.

The minister’s influence could range widely, covering everything from the relatively small – local school and hospital configurations – to the very large, such as high-speed rail, renewable energy, nuclear power and even the rollout of super-fast internet services.

“You could argue broadband, flood defences and power are all a key part of infrastructure,” says Mark Johnson, a partner at TPP Law.

An infrastructure minister would bring together disparate bodies such as Infrastructure UK (IUK), the Infrastructure Planning Committee (IPC) and the proposed green investment bank. The Conservatives are set to modify the IPC, whose lack of democratic accountability they find troublesome, by insisting that an elected politician must sign off any large project. That would be an ideal job for an infrastructure minister.

Waterston believes the role would be most effective if the minister was given full control over the separate bodies. “If there’s a close interface, it will be very effective,” he says.

But, he warns, an infrastructure minister

could confuse matters, and add another unnecessary layer of bureaucracy, if the role were not properly linked to the existing agencies – in particular IUK. A minister who tried to “run his own show” would undermine the role’s potential.

Though an infrastructure minister would need the Treasury’s backing to wield any real power, he or she would not necessarily sit within the Treasury. “Clearly there has been a focus on putting infrastructure at the heart of government, through IUK and the IPC,” says

kicked into the long grass,” says Norman Perry, of lawyers HBJ Gateley Wareing.

But even that could prove problematic. “I’m not sure other departments would take kindly to an infrastructure minister popping up in Treasury,” says Cohen. “It looks a little bit out of place.” Secretaries of State in other departments might object to a junior minister from the Treasury telling them what to build – particularly if they were from a different party.

Waterston says an infrastructure minister would, at the very least, need to attend Cabinet, even if not



The cabinet: facing tough decisions to make the coalition work

Lloyds’s Gershon Cohen. “At the moment they are answerable to the Treasury, but they’re not funding bodies, so they might be better under an infrastructure minister.”

But could an infrastructure minister function outside the Treasury? To be effective, a minister would need influence across a number of established departments – in particular energy and transport.

“We already have a Minister for Transport, for example,” says Cohen. “Given roads and rail come under his remit, do you pass off investment in these to a [separate] infrastructure minister, or is he a junior minister within that department?”

Most dismiss the idea of the role being a junior ministerial position in an ordinary spending department, because the incumbent would lack the power to implement a strategic plan for the entire infrastructure estate.

One senior partnerships lawyer suggests the role could be taken on by one of the four junior ministers within the Treasury to give it greater clout. “If it’s in another ministry, then it’s being

as a full member. “To be of use to the industry, they would need to be in Cabinet,” he says. “If they’re a junior minister, they will have less influence.”

No surprise then that David Cameron has chosen not to create an infrastructure minister. Despite its potential to improve strategic planning, he must realise how divisive the role could be in cutting across the portfolios of other ministerial roles. Facing clashes aplenty between his Tory and Liberal Democrat ministers in the coming months, he may find the prospect of adding another antagonist to the pot too much to contemplate.

He might then usefully plump for a halfway house. Instead of creating a new minister, the government could set up a cross-party committee to focus on the country’s infrastructure needs.

“It needs an all-party committee to draw up a plan for infrastructure and get the approval of all stakeholders,” says TPP Law’s Mark Johnson. “Otherwise it becomes a political football.” Such a committee could also help make decisions “more long-term”, he suggests.



Johnson: all-party committee needed