

The re-shuffle of MOD ministers is an interesting exercise in the Kremlinology of the coalition. The MOD is now regarded as just another department of state, as all of the reform work is in hand under Hammond's guidance. This re-shuffle has seen some familiar faces depart, notably Gerald Howarth, who will receive a knighthood for his services, as will Nick Harvey.

By Nick Watts, Great North News Services

Lord Astor remains in place as the spokesman in the Lords, as an unpaid minister. He performed the role as Opposition spokesman on defence and knows the brief well. His military service was in the Life Guards.

Rt. Hon. Andrew Robathan who replaces Nick Harvey as Minister for the Armed Forces has served in the Department since 2010 as minister for veterans' affairs and personnel. He was also a member of the shadow defence team, before becoming deputy chief whip. He was an early Cameron supporter. He will be very popular with the troops as he can draw on his military experience as a Coldstream Guards officer and a member of the SAS.

Andrew Murrison who joins the Department was a member of the shadow defence team and was the author of a review of service military treatment called "Fighting Fit". He is an ex Surgeon Commander and as a reservist served a 6 month tour in Iraq in 2003. His qualifications make him an ideal replacement for Andrew Robathan. He was previously a supporter of Michael Portillo's leadership bid.

Rt. Hon. Mark Francois also joins the department as a fresh face. In opposition as a Eurosceptic, he was shadow spokesman on Europe, which will equip him well to take the role vacated by Gerald Howarth. Prior to entering parliament he ran his own lobbying business and was a member of the TA serving in the Royal Anglian Regiment. After 2010 he was made a whip and served as Vice Chamberlain of Her Majesty's Household, reporting weekly to the palace on developments in parliament. For this he became a Privy Councillor.

Phillip Dunne comes to defence with no previous exposure to this brief. In this regard he is similar to Peter Luff, who he replaces. His background is described as a farmer, but he has also been a banker and founded and ran Ottakar's a chain of book shops which was purchased by Waterstones. Since election in 2005 he has served on various parliamentary committees and after 2010 became a junior whip. If Osborne is seen as the architect of this re-shuffle then it might be reasonable to assume Dunne fits into this mould.

The new team has quite a range of military experience. The challenges they collectively face is now to deliver on the reforms which have been put in place.

- The challenge of defence procurement remains, although is allegedly under control. The headroom in the Equipment Programme could be quickly eaten up by one project slipping or

going over budget. Contractorisation of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation and the implementation of the Defence Material Strategy to reform DE&S

- The business of managing the transition to Force 2020 will require all of Andrew Robathan's political savvy, as well as his ex-service knowledge.
- Mark Francois will have to build bridges with European and NATO Allies, which he will no doubt enjoy.
- Andrew Murrison will be at home dealing with the medical and personnel issues he dealt with in opposition.

Not that things will be all plain sailing. The MOD still has a long way to go in reforming itself. The budget will continue to be tight, despite Philip Hammond's assertion earlier this year that he had balanced the budget.

The departure of Nick Harvey as the Lib Dem minister poses an interesting question regarding the long standing wish of his party to review the renewal of the nuclear deterrent. This probably represents a calculation by Clegg that this issue will be parked until the next election. Should the 2015 election result in another uncertain outcome, the Lib Dems will certainly insist on a review of the nuclear deterrent as a requirement for their participation in government. Since both main parties seem to be in favour of renewing the deterrent this will make for some interesting discussions. In the meantime this will enable the Lib Dems to concentrate their political energy on the issues where they feel they can score some runs ahead of the next election.