

CABINET RESHUFFLE

Forget the deck chairs, take the bridge

Few events in politics are as captivating as a cabinet reshuffle, amid the excitement of new ministers rising to confront great national challenges, and the more profound satisfaction of seeing lousy incumbents demoted.

But the value of a reshuffle can be overstated. Frenzied reshuffling scarred the Jacob Zuma era, when we had a new energy minister every year, the “weekend special”, yokels from the maize provinces, and spooks from KwaZulu-Natal – and all of the appointments were proclaimed in advance in *The New Age* newspaper.

For his last reshuffle in May 2019, Ramaphosa explained “a number of considerations” was taken into account, such as “experience, continuity, competence, generational mix

and demographic and regional diversity”.

Now that leading ministers are keen to spend more time with their families, or with their lawyers, Ramaphosa has presumably been scouring a list of members of the ANC national executive committee looking for these qualities, perhaps with a growing sense of despair.

He will also have run his finger down the roll-call of liberation movement members deployed to parliament. This dismal catalogue prominently features political zombies such as Supra Mahumapelo and Faith Muthambi, consigned to rot in the committee rooms precisely so that they could do no further harm to the country.

Ramaphosa is less pressured by opposition parties than he should be because the white walkers of Dainfern and

Bryanston will not breach the wall to vote in large numbers. Ramaphosa’s primary concerns are closer to home, and he will be wary of pushing powerful comrades out of the cabinet without very good reason.

He may conclude a reshuffle is merely the rearrangement of deck chairs on the Titanic. Why not go straight to the bridge, and steer the ship away from the iceberg himself?

First, Ramaphosa can exercise power through the senior officials who are the repositories of a modicum of wisdom, or at least institutional memory, in government departments. If they do their jobs properly, officials in the forum of directors-general can avoid disturbing the placid intellectual waters that ideally should characterise the ministerial mind.



ANTHONY BUTLER

Indeed, reforms under way may soon extend the tenure of effective directors-general, and a new role for the public service head in managing careers may soon tilt the balance of power towards the centre.

Second, the presidency itself can surely take on some roles reserved for ministers before. The Treasury is under great strain, but remains far more capable than its sectoral peers, and Ramaphosa has used Operation Vulindlela to tap into its expertise – not least in

energy policy. It may be that reason can be more generally deployed, for example in expenditure reviews, to rein in the budgets of functional departments.

The president’s advisory bodies, presidential councils, and commissions have been widely ridiculed. But the Presidential Economic Advisory Council, the Investment and Infrastructure Office, and the Presidential Climate Change Co-ordinating Commission are starting to generate realisable goals and concrete actions. The president can use their recommendations to drive strategic priorities from the centre of government.

Finally, “do-nothing” ministers have not been the central problem. The real challenge has been the small number of capable ministers

who have been actively obstructing Ramaphosa’s stated priorities, energy minister Gwede Mantashe and public enterprises minister Pravin Gordhan among them. As Ramaphosa showed yesterday, when he lifted companies’ electricity generation threshold to 100MW, he is perfectly able to overrule his ministers when they are blocking key reforms.

Governing from the centre can be a hazardous enterprise, and the odds against success remain daunting. However, for passengers on the Titanic, Ramaphosa’s decision to centralise greater authority in the bridge of the presidency is a more positive development than yet another rearrangement of the deck chairs.

● Butler teaches public policy at the University of Cape Town.