

Ministers reflect

Baroness Kramer

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Biographical details

Electoral history

2010-present: Liberal Democrat Member of the House of Lords

2005-2010: Member of Parliament for Richmond Park

Parliamentary career

2013-2015: Minister of State for Transport

Baroness Kramer (BK) was interviewed by Nicola Hughes (NH) 18th January 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project

Nicola Hughes (NH): I would like to start with when you were first appointed as a minister which I think was 2013. Could you tell us what your experience of coming into government was like?

Baroness Kramer (BK): My appointment was completely unexpected. On the day of the re-shuffle, I suppose people who thought they might be asked were sitting by their telephones; I was showing some friends around the Palace of Westminster. I kept seeing these annoying messages coming up on my phone, which I ignored for a long period. And when I finally looked properly, there was an 'Urgent. Get over to the Deputy Prime Minister's Office.' So I shot over there.

I thought if anything, perhaps I would be invited to be on some kind of advisory group within the banking sector. It never occurred to me that I'd be offered a ministry and then to be offered a Minister of State within the Department for Transport. I mean, it was a delight, but also a shock. And I think I burst into tears, quite frankly, it was such a surprise.

I was absolutely thrilled and delighted and felt incredibly privileged, but had done no preparation whatsoever. I then had to wait as I carried on taking friends around the Palace of Westminster until I got a call from David Cameron, whom I spoke to very briefly. He seemed quite relieved that I was happy, so I suppose other people must have been grumpy, but I certainly wasn't. I was told to go over to the department. The department had been waiting for me for ages. So I physically got to the department and there was my private office in the front lobby, waiting. And there's an immediate process in which you get tagged and photographed and get your pass. [Then I went] upstairs and it was 'Minister, we are close to the end of the day. These documents have all got to be signed by this evening.' And I don't think the pace ever stopped from there.

Where I was extremely lucky, and I'm not sure how much people had clocked this before my appointment, is that I do have quite a background in transport. So even looking at a set of documents that did need signing, because of meetings that were happening in Europe and various other places, I was sitting at this pile of deadlines and at least I had some context, which I think gave me a great deal of confidence. So that got me through the initial start-up.

I think as a minister, you are incredibly dependent on your private office and I had an outstanding private office. A couple of people changed over the time that I was there, but I had a very good Head of Office, a lady called Rosa, who really understood how the Civil Service worked and was well-versed in transport. And then the others in my private office were a mix of people who had a very strong transport background and people to whom it was new, but who were unbelievably bright and could catch up on the issues. And particularly, a couple of people with real political nous so that when they picked up material on an issue, they could understand what the crucial decision was, what the pitfalls might be, and where potential conflict lay. And that is, I think, enormously helpful. So I was extremely lucky. I also had the world's best diary secretary, bar none – a lady called Ellen, who is amazing. I think that also was absolutely crucial to being able to very quickly survive in the role in being a minister.

NH: As you said, you had some context in transport and infrastructure. Apart from support from your private office, how did you get your head around how Whitehall works and the day-to-day working of being a minister, signing things off, boxes and so on?

BK: Well, I think it is a different role being a Liberal Democrat in a coalition because within my department, I was the only Lib Dem. Patrick McLoughlin, who was Secretary of State, was, I think, a

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very collegiate individual until we got much closer to the general election campaign when things became more tribal, certainly from the Conservative side. In fact, it became very tribal at the very end.

Still, we had different perspectives. So, for example, Norman Baker, who was my predecessor as the Liberal Democrat, had set the pace on environmental issues. Issues like sustainability were really nowhere on the Conservative agenda, yet they had become significant in the department's policy and programmes. There was significant funding behind them. So, there was a difference in perspective.

I followed up on Norman's work and a range of programmes, such as investment in local sustainable transport, train station investment, significant protection for the bus budget, and community transport, would not have made their mark within the department without Liberal Democrats being there. I also played a key role in driving forward the agenda for ultra-low emission vehicles, which was a joint activity of both BIS [Department for Business Innovation & Skills] and the Department for Transport. The same was true for disability issues, which I thought needed to be very much more significant within the department and were of far less interest to the Conservatives than 'can we build some more highways and get some more cars moving faster down the roads'. However, we did have lots of common ground, HS2 [High Speed Rail 2] being a very good example of that.

So as a Liberal Democrat, I was quite isolated and I would think, 'if only we were all Liberal Democrats in this department, we could really crack this problem'. I feel confident that had we all been Liberal Democrats, this country would now be a major player in ultra-low emission vehicles. We would have moved so much faster to begin to sort out the bus network, which has been really neglected and is a precipitously declining but crucial area of transport. So there are things we could have done differently. I depended a lot on my spad [special adviser]. But again, I only had a small part of his time. He was a very good spad, but one that worked across several departments, whereas the Conservatives had, I think, three spads totally focused on transport and on getting a much more Conservative-biased transport agenda established.

So, when it comes to bouncing around ideas, thinking through strategies, considering priorities, you are very isolated when you belong to the minority party in a coalition and there's just one of you and there's no one to brainstorm with.

NH: And were you able to use your fellow Lib Dems in the Lords or others in the parliamentary party or Lib Dem ministers from other departments? Was there much working together?

BK: We did work together and I worked with Dan Rogerson who was [a minister] over at Defra [Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs], particularly on air quality issues. We had to throw our bodies across the tracks on a number of occasions to stop the Conservatives watering down the EU's positions on air quality.

I worked with Ed Davey [then Energy Secretary] over at DECC [Department for Energy & Climate Change]. Again, very often, particularly in Europe, the overlap between Transport and DECC was considerable and Ed was in a position where he could take a lead and get some strong messages across, for example, on bio-fuels and ILUC [indirect land use change].

I didn't have big battles with Conservative colleagues; I don't want to exaggerate the difference. But there was an underlying difference in emphasis. In some ways, a lot of that reduced during the time when I was at the department because Nick Clegg was leading the push to localism and for devolution. As a minister in the Cabinet Office, Greg Clark, a Conservative, was supporting Nick and was in charge of a new approach to funding the Local Growth Fund; I was the Transport Minister attached to the Local Growth Fund. And interestingly enough, the Conservatives decided that they would stamp their identity

on devolution, particularly because Michael Heseltine had focussed on the issue and pushed for action. But none of it would have happened without Nick forcing and creating the structures that made it all work.

It's interesting, I think, when you have more than one party in government. It's not a 'you win this issue and I win that issue'. You end up very often getting a project which everybody then takes ownership of and considers to be their own – very often better, I think, than the ideas that would have emerged from one party alone.

NH: Did anything particularly surprise you when you first went into the department? Was there anything that you hadn't anticipated about being a minister?

BK: I regretted the fact that I was only going to be there for a short time and part of it would be chewed up by the approach of the general election which would paralyse making big changes. So I had to be realistic about what I could do within a relatively short span of time and I decided on two strategies: first, if a project was going really well, and HS2 is a good example, I would work on it but limit my time. In the case of HS2, the project had gathered its own momentum. I did focus on the route and the stations for Phase II of the project, but other than that I only needed to make sure that Parliament, and particularly the Lords, stayed on board with the agenda. But that was an agenda that was moving.

I needed to protect programmes that were at risk from the Conservatives, especially the environmental and sustainability agenda. I then focused the agendas that had been neglected where I could do something, and disability and smart ticketing were probably the most significant of those.

In terms of working with the Civil Service, it took me a while to realise that there were some parts of the department where I would really need to press and kick. I think it probably took me too long to realise that. In parts of the department, you thought you'd agreed on something, that it was going to move forward and it would just disappear and you would try and resurrect it and get it going. [It was] the unevenness of the Civil Service performance that surprised me. You had, in some places, real energy and enthusiasm and in others, a sort of jaded 'we've seen this all before' and they probably had.

NH: How did you try and deal with that? Was that through your private office or would you just be firing requests for updates from those teams? How did you go about it?

BK: Both of those strategies. I mean, sometimes working through the private office; my private office was excellent as I say. Other times, just insisting on another meeting to discuss something. But the problem is, when people don't have enthusiasm, it is really hard to get productivity from them, even if you meet again. And you can talk with senior people in the Civil Service, but I am not hugely impressed by internal management, so I am not sure that I saw real change.

If I had had a five-year run at this, given that it took me several months to understand and begin to have a sense of how things worked and how it could be different in different parts of the department, I would have made a real push to get some people moved and some fresh blood brought in. Because it seemed to me that that's probably the only way you can do it. If you put all your energy into trying to fight a group that are reluctant, you just never get anything done; it is a waste of everyone's energy.

NH: Where do you think that came from? Why do you think that enthusiasm wasn't there?

BK: I do think you get within departments people who become stale and jaded and they have probably seen administrations come and administrations go. Policy is brought in; policy is discarded. They

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probably lose heart and I have sympathy with that. I didn't want people out on the street. I just think there might have been somewhere where they could have found some new enthusiasm.

NH: One of the things some of our previous interviewees have talked about is chatting to their predecessors to find out where the bodies are buried and to get to know the ministerial take on departments a bit, did you do that?

BK: Yes, for me, it would have been Norman Baker. Our portfolios were not identical.

NH: Yes.

BK: But yes, we went and had a great big breakfast of bacon and eggs. Norman, I think, was a brilliant minister, particularly on issues like sustainability. He was very good at recognising what he could do and getting something done. So I was taking over from somebody who was very impressive, but I think he felt that he had taken the programmes that he was interested in as far as they could go. One of the reasons why he was pleased to move on at that point was he felt that he had achieved the things that he wanted to achieve.

NH: Was there anyone else from across politics that you had looked up to as a really good minister or saw as a role model?

BK: Again, this probably comes from being a Liberal Democrat. I didn't know ministers [what] were actually doing. So, it wasn't as though I could say, this person and that person, and the other were very successful ministers. Pretty much all of us were doing it for the first time.

The time pressure is intense. I would be told that, for example, that Andrew Adonis [former Labour Transport Secretary] was really careful to carve out lots of thinking time when he was in his role at the department. I'm not that kind of person. I just want to take action to tackle obvious problems – how do we fix it, and let's get it done. And if you're working in a limited time frame of 18 months, you can't take long-term, strategic views. It's too late for that. So mine was a narrower scope, let's see what we can kick along the track as rapidly as we can and get past the point of no return.

So, I suppose I didn't see a way to get a lot of advice from previous ministers. There was general advice; be in charge of your diary and those kinds of things. What will be valuable out of the work that's been done with this programme [Ministers Reflect] is that it will be possible to sit back and get a sense of what previous ministers have experienced and see where that might be relevant if you are a new minister.

NH: Let's pick up on that diary point. You said you had a very good diary secretary. How did you split your time up and how did you manage all the competing demands on it?

BK: My instinct is to say, 'I'll just do everything.' I wanted to be out and to be visible around the country. I think there wasn't a Friday when I didn't travel and I would often be travelling at least one or two other days of the week. It tended to be driven by events – a project I wanted to see or open. I knew there were some things I needed to go out and see for myself. So with HS2, where we were making decisions on the route north of Birmingham, it was crucial to travel the route. With some of the local transport projects, some of the things we were doing with trains, bus networks, tram... I wanted to go and personally see them. I find it important to actually be on the ground and get a sense of what's happening and not just depend on other people's reports on what's happening.

So I probably travelled too much and that obviously consumes a fair amount of time. But sometimes it had a big impact. The first thing I asked for when I got into the department was 'show me what

infrastructure is planned, what's underway and what's been done over the last few years?' And it absolutely stood out that almost nothing had happened in the south-west. So almost the first thing my office did was set up a trip to the south-west to go down and talk with the local councils. I quickly realised there were a lot of projects on the hopper at local level that were just going absolutely nowhere and we went back and kicked and kicked and it completely turned around. Now, in the end the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister were the ones going around, standing there, opening projects and announcing programmes and they bloody wouldn't have done any of that if I hadn't been in there giving them kicks to get these projects moving. And I am very proud there's been a real advance in transport and connectivity in the south-west. Of course then we had the appalling weather and the track collapse and other things which brought this area high onto the agenda. But we were able to move so fast afterwards because we actually had a stretch of time in which the real work had been happening to get some proper transport improvement down into the south-west.

NH: How about the Lords side of things? Did you think it felt very different being a Lords minister as opposed to your colleagues in the [House of] Commons?

BK: I'm sure there's a difference. I mean, first of all, the coalition, like any government, didn't have a majority in the Lords. So in the Commons, they could assume that legislation would go through; government could win every vote. Whereas I would have to take people with me and I've got to take people with me across parties. And on the issue that most exercised people, which was HS2, the project was clearly going to have to survive many different administrations if it was going to be a successful project. So that means you've got to build cross-party consensus.

The other thing was that when I looked at the Labour benches, [there was] some extraordinary expertise in transport on those Labour benches. I mean, virtually everybody who jumped to their feet to speak was a former minister or Secretary of State for Transport and they knew what they were talking about. I think in transport, a lot of people come to love the issues and are committed to transport improvement even more than they are to party success. So, it was quite fertile ground and I just really insisted that we had to work across all three parties.

Then of course many of those opposed to HS2 were in Conservative constituencies and that was reflected in the Lords. A lot of their concerns were fanned by the hyperbole of the anti-HS2 groups. So it was really important to make sure that I was building trust and was in conversation with them. I do think it is important to do that kind of work in the Lords and it was much easier that I was actually a minister in the department rather than being a Whip which, in transport, must be pure hell, frankly.

NH: I'm interested to talk about decision making and HS2 seems like a very good case study. As a minister, when you were presented with different options for routes or whatever it might be, how did you go about making big decisions like that?

BK: For HS2, there is a huge staff. I was also working with a Conservative Transport Minister, Robert Goodwill, in the Commons who had responsibility for the London to Birmingham section, which was the most visible part of the HS2 process because it will be built first. The Secretary of State was deeply involved and obviously it interested the Quad which means the Prime Minister, the Chancellor [of the Exchequer], the Chief Secretary and the DPM [Deputy Prime Minister]. To make matters more complicated, both the Chancellor and the DPM had constituency interests which they had to understand could not have primacy.

I think we pretty much made collective decisions on HS2. Decisions really were based on analysis and evidence. I've never been afraid of making decisions. I mean, my background is that of a fairly old-fashioned banker who would have to make a call knowing that it could wreck your institution. You had to have enough confidence. But I also know how important it is to listen. But then you recognise the

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decision you make will upset people who are quite legitimately upset, if that makes any sense. No decision is 100% good or 100% bad. Everything is a mix and it's on the balance of benefits that you are making the decision that you're making.

I think [it] was quite useful for me was to have a finance background. I'm comfy with numbers and cost benefit analysis. I was almost shocked to find in government that people tend to treat the information that comes from algorithms and cost-benefit analysis as if they are scientific judgments. Whereas what they are is interesting information to put into the mix to help you come to a decision. They are not litmus tests.

NH: I suppose on HS2 there's also a lot of public concern and lobby groups and so on. How good do you think government is at consulting on or working with the public on contentious issues?

BK: I think the Government struggles to work with the public on contentious issues. I mean, at least we try. You know, if we were in France, nobody bothers. At least we try. But I do think we certainly hit some problems on the ground where folk would be sent out to talk with a local community who might be very good engineers but who'd had no training on working with people. There is very little respect in Transport for what are regarded as soft and soggy skills, particularly in the more operational parts of the department or in the delivery groups, like Network Rail or HS2. I don't think we do the training that supports people in those conversations. It's not PR. It's not a case of using your golden tongue to persuade people falsely. It's a case of having the skills – so that you're not intimidated when you're in a situation when someone is genuinely upset and you can try and understand and also recognise you may not be able to satisfy their concerns. Building a project like HS2 that goes through some extraordinarily beautiful countryside, there is not going to be an answer in which the negative impact is zero, there just isn't.

And I do think that as a government, we probably are not good on consultation. I'm always nervous of the strategies that government always proposes to cut through consultation and speed up a process. What you don't want to have is loads of wasted time. But there really does need to be in-depth conversation.

I think the Coalition actually is a very interesting example. If you look back at the Coalition, it brought the country through one of the most dire recessions, certainly one of the most significant financial collapses that we have ever seen. And it brought the economy through, keeping employment at relatively high levels. Obviously, there was an impact on communities, but it was limited. And at the same time, the Coalition started to turn around what had been generations of neglect of infrastructure, of business and growth, and education.

It seemed to me one of the problems that the financial crisis exposed was how we have hollowed out large parts of the economy and are dependent so much on one sector, the financial sector. I think people will look back and be astonished at the progress that the Coalition made. I do think a big part of it was that inside government, decisions, ideas, projects could be challenged as a natural part of a process rather than stamped through because everyone felt they were all on the same team and therefore shouldn't say anything or examine an idea. The Quad was a very good example as a venue for challenging proposed policies. And I think that is something that it would be really worthwhile trying to build in to single-party government.

I would get contacted by certain Conservatives to say, 'This policy is absolutely ghastly but I don't know how to stop it.' I could funnel that back up to the Quad where four people would look at it and say, 'how did this get here?', 'who thought this up? Stop now' and it would have just sailed through quite blandly otherwise.

NH: One more thing on decision making - how did you deal with unexpected events or crises? When something suddenly hit the department, how did you go about it?

BK: Well, we all rushed into COBRA [Crisis response committee – ‘Cabinet Office Briefing Room A’]. I think the Government is quite good at pulling all hands on deck in these situations. Crises are almost easier to deal with than ongoing projects, because you can see clearly what the problem is, so everyone is focused on trying to sort it. Blame-shifting is not an option in the middle of a crisis. And I think you do start to get some quite powerful responses.

We looked at issues like the floods and rail lines falling into the sea. Once you were into a crisis, it seemed to me that people did incredibly well in trying to get on top of the crisis with whatever resource was available at that moment.

There was a lot of pulling together and a lot of cooperation. It’s true there were also politics in it. So, for example, anywhere where the TV cameras would be basically, only the Prime Minister could turn up. You just think this is really stupid; can I just go quietly and take a look because I really need to be in conversation with people at the site?

But I thought crises like that were actually handled pretty well and there was a good system through the COBRA structure of keeping people involved and in touch and on the ball to cope.

NH: And you have spoken about a few things that you are proud of; what do you think was your greatest achievement?

BK: To be honest, I haven’t spent much time thinking about this. But as I say, what I could do was limited. I hope I got disability back on the agenda in a big way. We put a lot more money, even while I was there, into accessible stations – that was absolutely crucial. But I tried to get the bus network and the other transport providers to understand that disabled people are normal and that infrastructure and services must be designed with them in mind [and] not designed for people with no disability and adapted afterwards. So I hope we get progress, for example, in a much wider introduction of audio and visual guidance on buses and general improvements in the design of projects and training of engineers.

And if you’ll let me have a second achievement: making sure that the agenda for ultra-low emission vehicles continued to stay alive. Without the support from me and Danny Alexander [then Chief Secretary to the Treasury], that would have died. And at the moment, it’s less in the public mind because oil prices are low, but these things turn and it is absolutely crucial for the UK to become, not just a leader in people using ultra-low emission vehicles but a manufacturer of those vehicles and all the jobs that come with it, as well as research and development. I think when I walked in, there was a point at which that could have tailed off into nothing and it didn’t. It got the commitment from [HM] Treasury that it needed to remain a major force going forward.

NH: And did you feel, in general, having the back-up of the Treasury or of other people in government was quite critical to success?

BK: It was crucial that I could talk to people like Danny. I mean, it was crucial that we could have that a direct conversation because if it had been filtered entirely through the Civil Service, which I think had been the traditional mechanism, I’m not sure that we would have had Treasury support. I’m pretty sure we wouldn’t have had anything like as much disability money. I’m very certain we wouldn’t have had the money for ultra-low emission vehicles. Nick [Clegg] being so strong on sustainability issues made a difference too. That link back with both Danny and Nick I think was important.

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In the large parties, people don't know each other very well. Whereas in the Liberal Democrats, because we're little, we do know each other very well. So these conversations are natural. So, if your judgment is decent, you don't have to go over the moon to persuade people; there's already a built-in understanding and knowledge of the person. It helps that you have these close personal ties.

NH: You mentioned the lack of enthusiasm in certain parts of the department, was there anything else that you found particularly frustrating about being a minister?

BK: Some people may find it very easy to establish their priorities. I always struggle; I do get tempted to go off piste. I suspect that most of the successful ministers are those that absolutely stay dead on their priorities and I'm not quite so capable of doing that. Actually, my private office was quite helpful in trying to make me do that because they knew what my priorities were and they knew what my tendencies were as well.

I suppose, had I had a couple more years, I would have been a much more effective minister because you've just got to learn your way around at the beginning and there's no substitute for that. And then as we got close to the election, you were suddenly aware that this had all suddenly become incredibly tribal – certain information didn't flow my way, memos somehow missed my desk, my spad suddenly wasn't on information that was circulating. And you'd suddenly find that something you thought you were about to announce had been pre-empted – all of those difficulties [that come] of being in election mode.

NH: And are there any tips that you would give to ministers doing the job for the first time about how to be effective at it?

BK: First of all, I think it's wonderful. I found it far more exciting than if you'd asked me beforehand. I probably would have thought it was very much a paper-pushing, admin kind of role. And yet I think you actually can get things done. So, it is a case of find your priorities and focus on getting them done. You're going to need to build relationships in order to do that and good interpersonal skills help a whole lot because you are very reliant on other people and they're not going to give you that extra support unless you're treating them decently, and I'm conscious of some places where the ministers really couldn't get anything done because they just didn't treat people well.

I'm sure a really good minister manages to get media coverage. I never even spent time trying to do that. It's not my particular strength. So never expect to get credit for what you do. That is probably one of the most important messages. Invariably somebody else will, unless you're very good at media management – not my strength.

NH: Is there anything else that I haven't asked about that you would like to add or any final thoughts that have come up over the course of this interview?

BK: Well, I suppose only that there really is a need to set up structures that lead to challenge and if you don't have mechanisms where that can happen, then I do think government can get itself into a lot of trouble. And as I watch in the current Government, which obviously is Tory-only, I mean, how they got themselves into that tax credit mess is completely beyond me. That would have been caught and tackled [under the Coalition].

NH: What about challenge from civil servants?

BK: I found civil servants were not good at challenge. A few civil servants who were enthusiastic would come up with ideas, but an awful lot of them just wait to be told and you think 'you've got so much experience in this field, you talk to everybody, now how would you solve this problem?' I did ask this question. Given this, how would you fix it? What would you do? They would say, 'I'm not allowed to

suggest that.' But there's nothing wrong with suggesting something. And I do think there is a real fear within the Civil Service that they mustn't suggest, that they mustn't come up with ideas, that they mustn't propose initiating and they are there just there to provide you with information or to deliver what you've decided on. I really wanted to box some people around the ears on a couple of occasions because I thought within your head is so much knowledge and if you sat down and thought about this, you would come up with solutions.

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