INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Ministers reflect

Jacqui Smith

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Jacqui Smith – biographical details

Electoral History

1997-2010: Labour Member of Parliament for Redditch

Parliamentary Career

2007-2009: Home Secretary
2006-2007: Government Chief Whip
2006-2007: Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury
2005-2006: Minister of State for Schools
2003-2005: Minister of State for Industry and the Regions
2003-2005: Deputy Minister for Women
2001-2003: Minister of State for Health
1999-2001: Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Department for Education and Employment)

Jacqui Smith was interviewed by Peter Riddell and Nicola Hughes on 2nd June 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): If we can start at the beginning when you first started as a minister, could you talk us through what that experience of coming into government was like?

Jacqui Smith (JS): Well I mean the first thing that you realise when you become a minister is that it is an instantaneous ascension to the position. So you start the day sitting at home, as I did with my very young son on my knee. You get called by the Prime Minister. You travel down to London. In my case, I had a small blip at the gates of Downing Street where the police officer looked at his list and said 'Oh no, you're not on the list'! But eventually that was clarified and I got in to see the Prime Minister who told me he wanted me to take the role at the Department for Education. And then, of course, you go immediately from Downing Street to the department. And if you have a good Civil Service operation and there was at the Department for Education, you have a well worked through – induction is probably too strong a word – education process that enables you both through written material and through meetings to get an idea of the sort of policy areas that you're covering.

I became a minister in 1999 as part of a reshuffle that I suspect was pretty well telegraphed to people. So the feeling I got was the preparation had been done. Certainly as I realised later on in my time in government, it was possible to do some of that preparation when you knew a reshuffle was coming. Much more difficult, I think, is when you become a minister and then it's because somebody has resigned or it is a very sudden change and then perhaps the structures aren't there in place. I mean, you hit the ground running as a minister. I actually became a minister at the end of a parliamentary session but I have known colleagues who have become a minister in the morning and in the afternoon have been in Parliament responding on behalf of the department. You have a pretty short period of grace in terms of people's expectations of whether or not you're going to be up to speed with the whole policy area. And you effectively, and I still remember vividly on the first day, David Blunkett was the Secretary of State for Education and Estelle Morris was my immediate superior, as Minister of State. I couldn't have wanted a better team. But my private secretary said to me, I think on the very first afternoon, we are in the middle of or we're coming towards the end of a review of the national curriculum, one of several reviews of the national curriculum. And there are some decisions that need to be made and you need to provide some advice to the Secretary of State. And I was due to go on holiday the next day, and I can remember saying to my private secretary 'So would it be OK if I took the papers away and then came back with my thoughts after my holiday in a week and a half?'. And she looked at me rather pityingly and said 'No, the Secretary of State is expecting this tomorrow'. [laughter]

So, I think one of the shocks of ministerial life is the speed with which decisions need to be taken. One of the shocks is the amount of paper and, not always decisions, but reading and general information and submissions that you need to process and the speed with which you need to do it. I suppose that also highlights another key issue for you as a minister, although over which you have relatively little control, particularly as a junior minister, and that's the extent to which your private office helps you to do the job. And I consider myself very lucky in my first ministerial job to have had a private secretary who was pretty experienced in having worked with other ministers beginning the role and provided me with the sort of guidance on [the] process and what a submission was and how the correspondence was dealt with and how you might go about agreeing or not agreeing to do a particular event. All things which, if you didn't have somebody to explain to you, it would be pretty opaque actually in terms of the way that government works. So having a private secretary in the private office that are able to support you through that is really, really helpful.

Peter Riddell (PR): When you got the call to Downing Street, and when you were eventually admitted, did Tony Blair say anything about what he wanted you to do, as opposed to saying 'This is the job you've got'?

JS: No, and I think this is very interesting. The only time in my ministerial career I really got guidance from the prime minister about what they wanted me to do was when I became Home Secretary, when Gordon Brown and his team had produced a letter that said 'These are my priorities for the Home Office'. Actually, Tony said words to the effect of, 'You used to be a teacher, we thought it might be a good thing for you', you know. [laughter] 'We think you were doing some good work, we'd like you to go to the Department for Education and have responsibility for schools, off you go'. 'Well done', shuffle you out. So no, very little guidance. David Blunkett did arrange quite quickly for me to have a one-to-one with him. And he talked about some of the priorities that he had for the department and some of the things he wanted me to focus on. What I also realised quite quickly, and certainly in retrospect, is that if you are a parliamentary under-secretary of state, you've become a minister, you are enormously proud, your parents are very chuffed. And you know, it's great. Then you realise that actually some of the work that you are doing is of a reasonably low level, I think is fair to say. [laughter] So there were areas where David asked me to focus, special educational needs for example, where we had a piece of legislation coming up but quite a lot of the other work of my ministerial life was, for example, events where the invitation letter had written on the top 'The Secretary of State doesn't want to do this event, ask Estelle'. [laughter] And in Estelle Morris' handwriting it said 'No thanks, ask Jacqui'. So you sort of realised where you are in the pecking order.

PR: Was there any hand-over – who was doing the job before you?

JS: Charles Clarke.

PR: And then Charles moved on to the Home Office? Not as secretary of state, but hadn't he moved to a minister of state job?

JS: Yeah. Yes. I think it probably was in the Home Office, yes.

PR: Did you talk to Charles at all, was there any handover?

JS: Not really. No. No. I think the challenge, of course, is that if you are promoted or reshuffled into another ministerial job, you yourself then have all the challenges of that. So equally, I often didn't talk to the people who came into my job after me. I think on one occasion I spoke to, I can remember having dinner with Alun Michael, whose job I partially took over I think at the DTI [Department of Trade and Industry]. But on the whole, no.

PR: Again in contrast with almost anything else in life.

JS: Exactly. Yeah. [laughter]

NH: And when you did move to different departments – you went to Health and then [the Department of Trade and] Industry and then Chief Whip and then Home Secretary – how did you get your head round those new briefs? You'd established by then what some of the processes were about being a minister, but how did you establish how the policies worked and what your priorities would be?

JS: Well, I think when you… There is a sort of golden period when you arrive in a department, when you are not bogged down in the detail day-to-day stuff. And actually, when I was more successful in ministerial roles, it was when I realised that and took advantage of that period of time to say, 'The priorities I'm really interested in are x and y', before those things get imposed on you. I mean obviously if you're secretary of state and the Prime Minister says 'I want you to focus on this', then that's what you do. But there is the ability even at a relatively junior level in government to carve out some areas that you want to focus on and make your own priorities. I mean, different people have different ways of doing it; I like to read things. So I would take away the folder, read most of it, probably on the first night, in terms of the background to policies. Then there is almost certainly a series of meetings set up with the

key teams to talk to you about what they think the things are that they've been working on and to get your early ideas of what your feelings are about those and where you want to focus. But in terms of taking an initiative, I think you need to do that reasonably quickly in terms of identifying the things you want to prioritise.

NH: And how did the different departments you worked in compare? Were they very different?

JS: Yes. [laughter] They were. I think the Department for Education at the time that I worked in it, on both occasions I worked in it, I think was the best department that I worked in. The one I felt most at home in. Not simply because of the subject area, but I think it was well led, it was well organised, it was efficient whilst also being innovative and energetic in terms of the ideas that it came up with.

The interesting thing of course about ministerial roles is that they are in different parts of the department. So my first job at the Department for Education, working in the Schools Directorate, was in what was I'm sure seen as the sort of mainstream area of the department. When I worked in the Department of Health I was promoted, so I was a minister of state. But I think it would be fair to say I was in the part of the department that was slightly less mainstream. So I was the Minister of State that covered social care, children – which was then in that department – mental health, chronic diseases, long-term conditions. John Hutton was the Minister of State who did mainstream NHS and NHS reform and that was, if you like, the area where the action was. So I think about my time in the Department of Health as being less well supported in terms of the quality of advice and the sort of thinking that I was supported with. To be fair, I don't know whether that was a departmental issue or whether or not it was because I was in the bit of the department which I suspect didn't attract the most interest [compared to] the people who were really doing the thinking and the policy development.

Equally, when I went back to the Department for Education I was back in the mainstream again, doing a schools bill, so there were lots of the best thinkers that I was working with. In the Department of Trade and Industry, that was interesting, because of course there I had a job that straddled industry, corporate governance and the equalities brief. Because the government equalities unit of course moved around from department to department, depending on which cabinet minister had that responsibility. And at that point it was Patricia Hewitt [then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry]. So I was Deputy Minister for Equality in the Department of Trade and Industry. I think it was quite difficult for the civil servants in the government equalities unit. What was interesting about them and sometimes slightly disconcerting is that they were extremely passionate about the policy areas that they were covering. Now, in one way that is quite energising. In another way, it is a very interesting demonstration of what you want from a civil servant. So actually, what you want from a civil servant almost is not somebody who has very personally bought into the policy. You want somebody who knows about it in detail and is committed to it and is willing to generate ideas but actually there were a few times I think, where I felt that actually what the civil servant was doing was arguing their particular perspective, rather than acting more as a sort of policy developer and formulator.

Then on the other side, rather more sort of mainstream DTI work in terms of the industry. What I felt there was, you know if you are in the Department for Education or if you're in the Department of Health, as a junior minister you will spend a lot of your time doing media work. You will spend a lot of your time doing adjournment debates. So in those four years I had developed a view of ministerial life which was – quite a big part of it was getting up at six o'clock in the morning, going to Millbank, doing a load of interviews, looking at the media grid, thinking about what both the positive and negative stories were going to be and how we were going to respond to them. I can remember quite early on in the DTI, saying to the press team 'So what are the stories that we need to be concerned about this week?' And they went, 'Well…' - a bit of shuffling of paper - '…I don't think there's actually anything particularly this week in your area.' [laughter] I was thinking 'Blimey, in four years I have never had a week where there wasn't

some media calls and things were going to hit in some way or another or a requirement for a comment.' So that was also a slightly different way of working and the balance of the work that you were doing.

NH: So you went from being a minister of state, and then Chief Whip and then Home Secretary. What was the jump like from minister to home secretary, this very big important cabinet job, did they feel like very different roles?

JS: I think it was quite interesting to do the Chief Whip role in the middle. So schools minister was full on, interesting, [a] controversial policy area that the Prime Minister was very interested in, difficult piece of legislation going through. So I was quite involved with Number 10, with advisers, with what was going on, what felt like the important priority policy areas of the Government, which I suspect was the reason why I then became Chief Whip. Because there was a view I suspect that I could handle those sort of issues and the management of the PLP [Parliamentary Labour Party] and things.

If you're chief whip, of course, it's a very different ministerial job because all of a sudden you are not taking home two boxes every weekend and one box every night. You're taking home half a box at the weekend, with really, sort of, business for the next week and things like that in it. Very little submission, policy making stuff. So much less paperwork. I no longer got into the car and got out a file of papers. I got into the car and got out the phone to call people. So it was much more about interactions, meetings, individual calls with MPs and fellow ministers. Getting an eye, a feel for the political programme that was going on across government, where it was going well, where it wasn't. Who we were going to have to focus some attention on, getting that legislation through. And a little bit more, in my case, media work than would normally be the case for a chief whip. I did a bit of media, whereas most chief whips would do none, but actually once again much more political and organisational within government than the other jobs that I had been used to.

I mean, if I am completely frank, my view of the Home Office before I went there was they had done the dirty to my friend, Beverley Hughes [who resigned as Minister of State due to procedural improprieties]. I wasn't wholly convinced about the quality of the civil servants there. And incidentally, I never thought I would become Home Secretary, I asked for a different job actually. But to the extent that I thought about what the Home Office was like, that's what I thought about it.

Incidentally on that asking for a job, when I talk about the role of a minister, I quite often say to people 'The other thing that's very different from any other job you might do is that you don't apply for it.' You know, you don't say 'I think I would do this job well, because I've got the following skills.' You don't have an interview. You don't. You have to be pretty senior in government before you can even express a view about what you think you might want to do. You usually don't turn it down when it's offered to you. So actually, that point when I was coming to the end of my time as Chief Whip and we were moving from Tony Blair as Prime Minister to Gordon Brown, it was the first time I expressed a view about what job I would like to Gordon and I got a different one! [laughter] That tells you something about the whole process I think, but, having been Chief Whip, I had experienced effectively what it was like to be the boss. And my view is that it was actually quite a relief and in some ways – I mean massively stressful as both Chief Whip and as Home Secretary. But personally, having control of your own destiny and setting the priorities for the Whips' Office or for the Home Office felt better to me than having to deliver other people's priorities. And I would be surprised if there are very many ministers who say 'I would really rather remain in the junior position.' I mean, having said that I very much enjoyed being the Minister of State in the Department for Education, because when you get a good minister of state job, you do get responsibility for an area of work and you really get to work on the detail of it and the policy development. And assuming your secretary of state is content with the direction that's going in, that's an extremely satisfying job. It's working with the stakeholders, whoever the stakeholders are. It's developing the policy. It's really getting into the detail of it, whilst also setting the strategic direction. So that is a brilliant job as well.

PR: You mentioned one thing earlier about relations with Number 10 and the fact that particularly when you were Minister of State for schools, that was obviously something that interested Tony Blair a lot. How important was Number 10 in your life and that nexus?

JS: Pretty important. You understood in those cases that these were things that the Prime Minister was interested in. On several occasions I had the dubious pleasure of attending a stock-take, which was a scary process where you were put through your paces.

PR: That's with Michael Barber [then Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit] sitting in…?

JS: Indeed yes. And Tony was extremely well briefed on what he was expecting to see and where the progress wasn't quick enough and what the targets might be and all of that stuff. Whereas in the DTI – very little interest at all. In fact interestingly, of course, in the DTI [there was] more interest from the Treasury than there had been in the [Department for Education], because what I now realise of course, is [that] the nature of the relationships of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor meant that some bits of government were the Prime Minister's and some bits of government were the Chancellor's. [laughter]

PR: Yeah, there were Tony's things and there were Gordon's things. That leads onto the other thing, the Treasury. How much did the Treasury impinge in your life?

JS: Very little until I became Home Secretary. And then that was the first time that I had to do a spending review negotiation. That was the first time where the negotiations with the chief secretary or whatever became significant. That was the first time where policy issues… no, you know, that was partly I suspect because Gordon was then the Prime Minister and there wasn't the division as you just suggested, Peter. But up until that point, very little. I do remember when I was in Health, for some reason I listened in on a phone call that the then Secretary of State, Alan Milburn, did with the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Paul Boateng, in which I would think it would be fair to say – without repeating the language – Alan expressed in the strongest possible terms that he didn't really care very much what the Chancellor thought about the policy that he was pursuing. [laughter]

PR: Indeed. The other bit of the equation is, even before you became Chief Whip, how important was Parliament in your life? Because one of the themes is the very different attitudes to being absorbed in the department; and you had a marginal seat as well. How do you balance out constituency, Parliament and ministerial life?

JS: I think with the first three jobs, all of a sudden you are not spending the time with your colleagues in Parliament that you were spending previously. Your relationship with Parliament becomes much more about individual MPs and their issues, perhaps meeting with them or whatever. It becomes about legislation. It becomes about the periodic oral questions. And actually that's largely it. One of the reasons why I liked being Chief Whip was it got you back into the politics of Parliament again, in a way that you probably don't do very much as a minister. You slightly forget the politics of Parliament if you are not careful as a more junior minister. Not as a more senior minister but as a more junior minister – which is surprising, because you spend quite a lot of time there.

PR: Because you're doing adjournment debates and bills.

JS: Tell me about it. [laughter] In the Department of Health it was not unusual to do four adjournment debates in a week – drudgery! I used to call that job the salt mines! And actually of course, you are also trying, which I think is a real – I don't know if it's improved now, but in my view the civil servants constantly failed to understand the significance of Parliament to you as a minister.

NH: Yeah. We've written a paper on it.

JS: Oh good, good, good! So you know 'Have a nice evening, Minister' as you left at half six without much recognition that what you were doing was going over to Parliament, where individual MPs would be bending your ears about your policy or about constituency issues. A sort of flippancy about the way in which they prepared you for parliamentary… [there was] technical expertise from the parliamentary branch, but a lack of understanding from very many officials that if an MP asks a question, they need to get an accurate response. And you need to be supported to provide that to them. A slight feeling that Parliament was a bit of a distraction from the really important work. I had to explain more than once that actually my accountability was to Parliament and to MPs. And therefore, if they were asking questions or writing letters or contributing to the debates, it was actually pretty important [and] that was the thing that was going to be my priority at that particular moment.

PR: Constituency?

JS: Constituency, yes. Equally, when you set off on a Thursday night back to your constituency and your private office said 'Have a good weekend'. [laughter] You thought to yourself 'Blimey'. So that would be getting up tomorrow morning and doing a series of meetings in the constituency. That would be tomorrow evening doing the surgery. That would be Saturday morning knocking on doors, you know every weekend. I think I was the first marginal seat home secretary that my protection officers had worked with. So my police protection team did use to find it quite amusing on a Friday to have to trail around the streets of Redditch. You can imagine it's a bit of a protection officer's nightmare to have a person they're protecting knocking on people's doors and wandering into their houses and looking at the tree hanging over the back of their garden. They were very discrete protection officers, but just occasionally they would say 'Is that really your job?' [laughter] But it was – you know, as a marginal seat MP, well that is your job. You are dealing with a warrant for an interception or you're being briefed about a terror attack and the next minute you are up somebody's street looking into a pothole and thinking about how you're going to deal with it.

NH: Thinking about some of your relationships within the departments: first of all with other ministers, both as a junior minister and then secretary of state, how did you feel the team dynamics worked?

JS: All of the secretaries of state that I worked with as a junior minister, all had some form of ministerial meeting. But I knew that that didn't necessarily happen in every department. That some of them were personally more supportive than others. I mean, Patricia Hewitt was very personally supportive of me and helpful in terms of the work that we were doing, particularly on equalities. I liked working with Alan, but I wouldn't say that there was a lot of… you know, I wasn't doing the work that he was particularly interested in and therefore there wasn't a lot of time that we spent together. David [Blunkett] was enormously busy but actually very warm and probably almost the most inclusive out of all of them. One of the first things he did was he asked us to write our ideas for interesting policy ideas that we had and thought about them seriously. Didn't do any of the ones that I suggested [laughter] but nevertheless thought about them and he engaged with us.

Of course, when you're Chief Whip that is a very team thing. And there's a lot of it that's about 'us versus the world', which is why I think it's very interesting how it operated with the coalition, but anyway I shall read whatever you've written about it. So team meetings, that type of esprit-de-corps type thing that you develop in the Chief Whips' Office is very important actually for the way the thing operates. So when I became Home Secretary, I hope that what I did was try to build a sense within the team, so we always had team meetings every week. I had individual relationships with the ministers. I felt [that] on the whole I received good support from them, some [were] slightly more semi-detached than others. I hope I provided them with the support to do their jobs as well. I think that's quite important. Where there were departments where that hadn't been built, it tended to feel fractured, well certainly from the outside it looked as if it was fractured in terms of people going off in their own direction.

NH: In terms of the wider organisation of departments, did you leave that to the permanent secretaries? What did you see as their role versus as your role as the minister?

JS: What I was taught quite early on was the distinction between the organisational, operational, internal operational issues (which were the job of the civil servants) and the policy development, decision making, communication stuff, which was the responsibility of the minister. If I had my time again, I would probably be more proactive when I started as Home Secretary, in thinking about how the department actually was organised to support what I wanted to do. I mean, I got on extremely well with David Normington [then Permanent Secretary]. I don't have any criticism of him, but for example, it took me about a year to realise that it would be helpful to have a strategy unit and I should have realised that much earlier on, and had that set up as a form of support to me. So the basic organisation of the department I don't think is the role of a minister, and I frankly wouldn't have had the time to do it, or the bandwidth. But ensuring that your policy priorities are reflected in the way that the thing is organised is important, and I probably underplayed the significance of that. Incidentally, that's what I was reflecting on when I did that interview in which I said, you know that when I arrived I didn't know, as it was reported, I didn't know how to run anything. Incidentally that wasn't what I said, but anyway, that was what was gleefully reported. What I meant was, I came into Parliament when I was just under 35. I became a minister quite soon after that. I had been a teacher. I hadn't run an organisation and therefore I didn't necessarily understand the significance of the way in which you set up an organisation for delivering a set of objectives. That's what I meant by not having had that experience nor quite realising the significance of it.

PR: Lots of thoughts on that. One, what type of training would have been appropriate? You did say in the interview that you had a half day or something when you became a minister in 1999?

JS: Yeah. Yes, I think I had about half a day. I can't really even remember much of what was said in that. Well, actually the only thing I can remember is Jeff Rooker saying 'My advice to you is the one constituency in the country where you don't want them to know you're a minister is your own.' [laughter] Very good advice! The rest of it was all a bit vague. So what would have been helpful? Actually, what I think would have been helpful is a bit of a discussion almost about the nature of the role and the extent to which you can influence, question and think about the organisation of the department as a way to help you deliver your priorities. Because I think I probably felt quite nervous about not overstepping the mark; and because actually nobody ever says to you 'Do you know what, the role of a minister is this and you will be most effective if you do these types of things, and the role of the Civil Service is this. And actually the interface is here, but you can suggest that or you can ask about that.' I think I would have found that helpful in terms of the organisational structure. There is then a whole load of stuff about the importance of clarity about your priorities, how you organise your time, how you might want to think about your diary, what you prioritise in terms of the activities that you do. If you could get an experienced minister to talk to you about that, I think that would be really, really helpful.

PR: Going back to the point Nicola raised about how you operated, was your private office enough? Because we now have extended ministerial offices as well – the succession of private offices you had over the period of 10 years, should they have been strengthened? Would it have helped bringing in more people? At the end of course you had your own special advisers sometimes?

JS: It was enough in my first role because she was a very good private secretary and the place was very well organised. And actually there is a limited amount of really political stuff in some ways that you do at that level. It wasn't enough in the Department of Health, but that was partly down to the quality of some of the people who were in the private office at certain stages. It was good in the DTI. When I went back to Education it was excellent and that was both because of the quality of people in the private office and also of the extent to which I had control over it. It felt like I had greater control over the policy teams

that I was working with, because I had a big job but a smaller range of things to do. So I was able to build up a relationship with people that enabled a deeper conversation and more, sort of, trust in what's happening. At the Home Office after a while – this was the other thing that I took some time to do and I should have done it more quickly – I mean effectively if we are perfectly honest what I did was translated a civil servant into a policy adviser as part of the special adviser set-up. And that was precisely in order to be able to get – you know, it wasn't party political, but it was political in the broadest sense – feel for handling stakeholders, that sort of relationship building, thinking through ideas and trying them out with people, where it was more difficult to get some straightforward policy officials really.

PR: What was the use of special advisers? You were talking about both when you are down the line, when you were working for David Blunkett and then Alan Milburn and then Patricia Hewitt, when you were in a sense at the receiving end of the special advisers and then when you used them?

JS: Yeah. I think I always had a good relationship with all of my secretary of state's special advisers before I became one. But that was partly because I think I was clear to them that I wanted to be helpful to my secretary of state. So with none of those was I ever in a position where they might have thought they had to defend their secretary of state from me. I was willing to take direction from them, to a certain extent. So I was willing to say to them, 'Look, actually what's your view about…' I mean, obviously I didn't go to them with day-to-day stuff, but where there was things that I thought the secretary of state was likely to be interested in, I would work with them. So I got on well with all of them. Having said that, it was quite clear to me that they weren't really a day-to-day resource for me to use. And I do think if you are a minister of state doing a difficult policy development piece of work, you need a policy/special adviser to help you to do that. Actually, I worked a lot with Ruth Kelly's [then Education Secretary] special advisers on the schools bill, because of the nature of that. She had got policy advisers, so actually there were four in her office, so there were enough of them to do it. Had she only had two, I don't think that would have been possible and it would have been much more difficult to do the job.

NH: What do you think was your greatest achievement as a minister, or the thing you are most proud of?

JS: The thing I am most proud of? I'm pretty proud of the delivery of neighbourhood policing as Home Secretary. That was quite clearly something that Gordon wanted to see delivered. It was a good example, I think of developing both the policy and the implementation. It required at one point weekly meetings with police chiefs in order to make sure that they were doing it. So I think it required a development of what we actually meant by 'neighbourhood policing' and how it developed. It went alongside other things that I am proud of, like developing the idea of community action and the policing pledge and various other things to bolster the idea of neighbourhood policing as being about building confidence and engaging with communities. I think that's probably the thing I'm proudest of. I'm pretty proud of having done it for 10 years and done a whole range of different jobs and done all of them, I think, pretty well and moving from one to another with less than two years in each one.

PR: Well, that's very interesting. On that point, were you moved around too often?

JS: Yes. [laughter]

PR: And what were the downsides, therefore?

JS: I think the sort of cycle of ministerial life is that you arrive full of ideas. Hopefully you set some priorities at that point. Then you start learning about all the difficulties of everything you need to do. After about six months you think this job is impossible. Then you begin to develop relationships and get a feel for things. After about 18 months you think 'I have got a grip of this, I know what I want to do and

I am beginning to see the results of what I have been trying to do' and then after two years you get shifted on somewhere else. [laughter]

PR: What was lost by being moved on?

JS: The combined political policy and operational nous that I had developed in the two years, which the next person then had to start working on again.

PR: And what I am also sensing – particularly looking at the junior minister and minister of state roles you've had – as you say it takes time to work out an initiative. So you'd moved on before it was really in place.

JS: Yeah. Yeah. So then you either had to decide if you wanted to deliver your predecessor's initiative which I sometimes did, or you had to decide whether or not you were going to dump that and move on to the thing that you wanted to do, which you almost certainly wouldn't get the chance to see through to the end. And incidentally what I now realise on the receiving end, so with my health hat on now, I'm quite sympathetic to ministers because I know what it's like to be moved on. And to be fair to David Cameron, these are ministers that stay in place longer than we did in government. But most people, in most public services, apart from the secretary of state, who is a hate figure, don't really know who the ministers are. And it's quite difficult to build up relationships and there is a tendency to down-play the significance of ministers because you know they're going to move on.

PR: How does that affect civil servants' attitudes to junior ministers?

JS: Good question. I always found civil servants pretty keen to work with me and to engage and to be respectful. I don't know what they said about me behind my back. [laughter]

PR: What I meant by that was almost the point you were making, Jacqui – as Robin Day famously said to John Nott, 'You're here today, gone tomorrow'?

JS: Totally. [laughter]

PR: Therefore when they said to you 'It's half past six, bye-bye' when you still had an adjournment debate to do or were leaving for your constituency stuff at the weekend, was there a sense of 'You are a useful person, but we know you won't be around.' Was there any sense of that?

JS: There was a certain amount of sort of resigned 'Oh hello, here's a new one' when you arrived. I hope, I believe that one of my strengths as a minister was the ability to build strong relationships with civil servants and a certain amount of mutual respect and affection even in some cases. So we worked through that reasonably quickly and usually, I think, they were sorry to see me go at the end. They often said they were. But it would have been strange if they hadn't thought to themselves 'Here's another one who is going to be here for two years.' What that therefore meant was… I think what that means for ministers, incidentally, is that they are in a hurry. And they are frustrated with civil servants who sometimes are doing the right thing by trying to create a speed of policy development, consultation, legislative development, which is probably slightly slower than ideally the minister wants. Because certainly after you have been moved a couple of times, after two years you think to yourself, 'I'm only going to have two years in this job, I want to get on with it.' And then you are impatient and that I suspect creates a bit of conflict between the civil servant who wants to do the policy right and the minister who wants to get it done in the time that they are going to be there and have the impact.

PR: Another bit of our work showed the importance of junior ministers in implementation. If you look at the Blair/Brown period you can identify the various initiatives where actually the junior ministers played quite an important role in it.

JS: I think that's absolutely true. Because you will likely as a junior minister, particularly a minister of state, have the relationships with not just the civil servants but those externally who are responsible for delivering things that will enable you to get things done. So I certainly felt as schools minister that I had a good relationship with head teachers, teachers and others, which was both about implementation – although rather more in that job, it was probably about giving them a voice and getting a feel for what would work and wouldn't work in terms of policy development and where we were going with the policy. Because you've also got more time to build those. The secretary of state cannot build those relationships that a minister of state can build.

NH: What did you find must frustrating?

JS: It's all just a haze of joy now, looking back on it! [laughter] I found the amount… I mean, I think I was probably too, not too hardworking but I was too focused on some of the detail. And therefore what I found frustrating was the sheer amount of paper to get through. That was frustrating. I did find the civil servants' attitude to Parliament frustrating. I found sometimes a failure to have a culture of service to constituents frustrating. That manifested itself in the quality of correspondence sometimes. I mean, I can remember on one occasion in the Department of Health getting so frustrated that I said 'Get the officials together, because I want to talk to them about, I want to try and give them a sense of why this is important.' And I actually said to them, 'Can you imagine if you had gone to see an MP because you were frustrated with the treatment that your mother was getting and the MP had agreed to write to the minister and you thought, "Oh great, at least I'm going to get an answer" and then you didn't get it for two months. How would you feel about that?' I hope that correspondence improved a little bit after that, but you know, that was frustrating – the idea that there wasn't really a culture of serving constituents via the minister.

I did find it frustrating sometimes as a more junior minister to be doing the very basic things. There were times when I looked at an adjournment debate and I thought 'Is there anybody in the world that is interested in this?' So that was a bit frustrating. What I found tense and tiring quite often was the media work, but I enjoyed it and I thought it was important, so that wasn't about frustration, that was about pressure.

PR: During your first few days as home secretary, you were hit by a major terrorist attack. That's a wholly different scale from anything you did before as a minister, and how did you find handling something which is developing into an extremely serious crisis. You didn't know how it was going to go, literally in the two days after you became…?

JS: Yeah, indeed. Absolutely right. I think it was probably a good thing that it happened right at the very beginning – almost. And the fact that, with the exception of the two terrorists themselves, nobody was really injured by it, meant that on reflection, actually it was a pretty good induction. Because what it meant was that very quickly I met the most senior counterterror people both in the police and in the security agencies. I got a feel for what happens when there actually is a live terror attack. I got a feel for what does Cobra [Cabinet Office briefing room A; emergency council] do and why is that significant, what role does a minister play at a time like this, what value can you add actually? All of those things were actually very helpful.

I mean, politically and personally, of course, what it did was put me in front of people quite early on. I quite often say, the thing that people most often said to me about my public performance that weekend was 'You appeared… you seemed very calm and reassuring.' Now there is a certain subtext there, which is 'You were the first female home secretary and you know, I think we partly thought you would go in, there would be a terror attack and you'd come out shouting "I can't manage it, bring a man in."' [laughter] But actually of course, you don't get to be home secretary without having… you haven't done anything that is of that scale and public facing, but if you've done it for eight years you've been through the mill, to be honest with you, and there aren't many media things or policy things or events that are

going to be completely unusual to you. You have been through that. What I suppose is different about being home secretary is that, in every other job you have some idea of what social care is and who does it. You have some idea of what teaching is and who does it. You have some idea of what industry is and who does it. You don't until you become home secretary really understand how the security agencies work. So that's quite new.

PR: You mentioned value added, that's a very interesting point – 'what value can I add when all this is going on?' The machinery is going on trying to contain it, find out 'Is it isolated? Is it a bigger thing?' and the first responders are dealing with all that stuff. What did you feel you could add as a minister?

JS: What I thought it was, was asking the questions that enabled everybody to have clarity about what we knew and what we didn't know. Public communication and to a certain extent reassurance and accountability to Parliament.

PR: That's very interesting. Because you sometimes feel, 'What actually can a minister add?' and it's very interesting, that definition. It is public reassurance, accountability.

NH: And just finally, what would be the pieces of advice you would give to a new minister, of how to do the job effectively?

JS: Decide the things that are really important to you early on and communicate them to the department. Decide how and communicate to your private office, how you want to live your life, but be realistic about the fact that being a minister is damn hard work and frankly if you say, I don't want to do any work at the weekend, you are probably being wholly unrealistic about what being a minister is about. Develop the relationships with the key civil servants that will deliver the policy priorities that are most important to you and get a sort of feeling of trust and understanding between you about what you want to do. And as you become more senior, try and find a way to build the capacity to support you in doing the things that you want to do as a priority.

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