INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Ministers reflect

Jo Swinson

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Biographical details

Electoral History

2005-2015: Member of Parliament for East Dunbartonshire

Parliamentary Career

2014-2015 and 2012-2013: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Employment Relations and Consumer Affairs (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills)

2014-2015 and 2012-2013: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Department of Culture, Media and Sport and Department for Education)

2008-2010: Shadow Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

2007: Shadow Minister for Women and Equality

2006-2007: Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland

2005-2006: Shadow Minister for the Arts

Jo Swinson was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Jen Gold for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project

Nicola Hughes (NH): Thinking back to when you first started as a minister, what was your experience of coming into government like?

Jo Swinson (JS): So this is back to September 2012. One of the interesting memories I have, I think it was the Tuesday and I think I had the discussion with Nick [Clegg], I'd gone into his office at the Cabinet Office and he'd asked me [to become a BIS Minister]. I was really excited. I'd been his PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary] before. And that was the Tuesday and we had oral questions for BIS [Department of Business, Innovation and Skills] on the Thursday – it might have been the Monday but I think it was the Tuesday – and apparently I couldn't get into the department until the Prime Minister had formally appointed me. So that afternoon I basically spoke to who was going to be my new private office, but I literally couldn't go into the department.

So we had a situation where civil servants came to do a bit of a chat with me in my parliamentary office. And then there was going to be a Statutory Instrument on the Wednesday afternoon that I should do but, again, couldn't do, I couldn't get a brief for. So in the end, Matt Hancock – he was appointed the same time as me but Number 10 had got round to doing his formal appointment – I think he had to cover it which meant I started off slightly on the back foot because I had no problem with doing the SI [Statutory Instrument], I just couldn't do it.

Obviously Wednesday morning the Prime Minister was then preparing for PMQs, so, you know, that was a bit of hiatus. I remember ringing and speaking to his Private Secretary to try and get it sorted. I was obviously quite scared that the next day I had oral questions. And in the end, I think, I got onto Jonny Oates, Nick's head of office, who then got it sorted and I finally got into the department I think late on the Wednesday and got some briefing and then had oral questions the next day. It was a very short time period before doing oral questions. And obviously that was one of the first big tests. So that was my initial experience of being appointed.

And then there was being introduced to the department with a chunk of reading and a private office that didn't really exist because basically there were loads of vacancies in the private office. So I ended up having an entirely new private office. By the time I'd been in post for three weeks, I was the most experienced member, with the exception of one Private Secretary who'd been there five months. Everybody else was new. In a sense this was quite challenging, but at the same time it actually ended up being quite good because we all learned together and it also meant I was able to have input into who my Private Secretaries were going to be.

NH: Outside of that – the briefing pack and the private office – what other kind of support was available to you as a new minister?

JS: Well, what I did was I just went and spoke to people. Obviously Norman Lamb was my immediate predecessor but I also spoke to Ed Davey because he'd done it until about six months before and obviously Vince [then Business Secretary] and Vince's special adviser.

One of the things that was quite nice was when I arrived at the department, Vince's Principal Private Secretary met me at reception and gave me a big hug because I'd been Vince's PPS for two years, so [she,] Jo knew me already and that was really lovely because that just made me feel a bit welcome. So I felt like really a lot of the support was, you know, speaking to individuals and then obviously we got scheduled briefs with the key teams in my portfolio. And the Ministerial Code was one of the first things I did, partly because I couldn't get into the department, I knew that was something I needed to know that was available online. So it is a little bit baptism of fire because you're thrown in at the deep end and you just have to get on with it.

NH: You mentioned being Vince's PPS before. Obviously you'd been in Parliament for a few years. How did those sort of roles and experiences prepare you for being a minister?

JS: Definitely being a PPS prepared me to an extent. You know, I'd attended the ministerial meetings in BIS so obviously I knew some people. I also had some understanding of how that department operated and to some extent there were differences between departments but, you know, weekly ministerial meetings are quite common and I've experienced a few departments because, although I was on BIS, also I was in my equalities position which initially was in DCMS [Department for Culture, Media and Sport] and then obviously Nicky [Morgan, Education Secretary] in terms of education. So I got a bit of a sense for different departments.

But then there was a whole load of things that I didn't see and I suppose it depends on the kind of PPS you are. I mean I don't know if some literally shadow their minister the whole time, I was much more Vince's eyes and ears spending time in Parliament and not being with him every minute of every day. So ministerial briefing meetings, prep for debates, all of those types of things wouldn't have been an element that I'd have seen. And I hadn't seen submissions. This whole concept of a 'sub'; I mean there's a whole separate language that you just don't understand about the Civil Service. I remember as a PPS, thinking how little as an MP I knew about the Civil Service. I think it is a real problem – particularly if you've not been in government you just don't have a clue – to the extent that I remember once I wanted to ask a question, a transport question I think it was, as an opposition MP, and it was issue I really wanted a good answer on. But it was a bit of a techie issue. So I thought it's a bit unfair to just spring that on the minister because then they wouldn't know and I wouldn't get a very good answer. So I wanted to let them know what I was going to ask. I remember saying to my office, 'Can you find a way of getting to them?' And, you know, they rang the department reception, didn't get anywhere. You know, even understanding the concept that there was such a thing as a private office that you could then know to ring and ask for the 'X' minister's private office wasn't something I knew as an opposition MP.

So I really think there's a gap in Parliament understanding the Civil Service but I absolutely found the exact same in the Civil Service in terms of Parliament. I mean even the Parliamentary Unit, to be honest. BIS have now got a former Parliamentary Clerk in its Parliamentary Unit and [she] Georgie was brilliant. And she was on the [BBC] 'Inside the Commons' documentary as well actually when she was in the Public Bill Office.

But that sort of understanding is, you know, it's few and far between in government; basic things like how adjournment debates work. You know, sometimes you just need to be reminded of something and I would say, 'Oh, can we just check is that in that back bench debate? At what point do I speak or is it a 10-minute speech?' And you'd get an answer and you'd think, I'm not sure that's actually right and I'd ring the Lib Dem Whips Office and then realised I'd been given the wrong information. So, yeah, I think that there's definitely a real need for much better understanding on both sides between Parliament and the Civil Service.

NH: So how did you get to grips with this Civil Service stuff? Did you just learn on the job or…?

JS: Yeah, pretty much learnt on the job. I think the first few weeks as a minister I found quite tough because you're suddenly thrown into this ridiculous world where you're supposed to be an expert on everything in your brief overnight which is obviously impossible. And I remember feeling like, you know, you have a degree of knowledge on different things, but I had a portfolio with things as diverse as insolvency law and consumer rights and equality legislation and promoting good employment relations. I mean it was some really detailed stuff. We joked in private office that submissions about TUPE [Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations] always needing to be accompanied by a cup of tea and a bar of chocolate, you know, it's so incredibly complex a piece of employment law. And as a non-lawyer, in particular, I was always kind of asking the question, 'How do we translate this into the real world and what this means for people?'

I remember kind of looking around at people that I knew that were minsters who were mainly guys and the way in which they did it with, in some cases, a certain degree of swagger or a degree of alpha male syndrome in government and just not really feeling like that was me. And so then I sort of felt a little bit out of place. And then I remember it was about six weeks in, I sort of realised that there was just not enough hours in the day to do anything else than just be myself. And I might be the only minister that wore pink shoes to the department, and, you know, that related in a very different way to officials in a briefing. I mean there was a fair bit of humour in my private office and irreverence. But I just realised I had to be myself. And in a sense once I'd... I remember a really interesting conversation with Vince's Private Secretary where she was really good at just reassuring me that I was doing all right and in a sense to not be scared that I was doing it a different way to different people. And after that things got a lot easier. I mean there was still a big learning curve, there was still a lot of things that were stressful and firsts and so on but realising that actually there is no one way to be a minister and the best thing is to use your skills and your own strengths and to be authentic because anything else just means you're putting far too much energy into trying to be something that you're not. Either you're going to be able to do the job well or somebody thinks you are because they put you in that position, or you're not, but you need to do it in your own way. So I felt happier and I think I was a lot better once I'd realised that.

NH: Was there anyone that you thought was a really good role model or anyone you took advice from?

JS: I think one of the difficulties is, and it's not as if you can't have a male role model, but it is just easier as a woman to look at other women. And of course there are not that many women minsters. I remember quite early on I had a telephone call on a particular issue with Theresa May and just coming off the phone and thinking, 'Whoa, wow'. Obviously I disagree with her politics on a range of issues but on issues like equality we actually got on very well because she is a passionate advocate of those issues within government long after she stopped having formal responsibility for that. But she is formidable. So I wouldn't say I absolutely see her as my role model but there are certainly elements of that that I recognised as a very effective way of working. So there's no sort of one role model but I think you sometimes look at how different people do things, whether it's the particular way they communicate or how they get something done or how they're totally on top of the detail on something or their performance in the chamber and think, 'Yeah, that's something that works well'.

NH: And still thinking about this initial period as a minister, what was the main priority for you? What was the main thing you wanted to achieve?

JS: In the initial period it was to try and feel like I was on top of it and to do that as quickly as possible for a range of reasons. You know, you don't know what questions you're going to be asked in the House, you don't know what adjournment debates you're going to have to do, you don't know when there's going to be some crisis in an area of your portfolio that if you then aren't on top of it it's going to be a problem. So the shorter the time period between starting and getting on top of it the better.

And I remember it feeling a little bit like those scratch panels where you scratch away a foil covering on a piece of paper. It felt a little bit like I had this piece of card that was my portfolio and every day I would scratch away different bits and I would have this picture where I would have different blotches. And some areas of the portfolio I found that I could get to grips with more easily and more quickly because perhaps I'd had more experience in that area before and there were other bits that were totally new to me and took a lot more investment to really thoroughly understand and feel like I'd got it.

But eventually it got to the stage where all of those different bits had been scratched out and I could see the whole picture. So I remember in the first few months there being this period of time where I felt like I knew this one area in a silo or this other area in a silo but when I felt like I then understood how it all connected I was so much more effective. And that's why I have to say I think that the policy of not moving minsters too frequently is a really important one because there is absolutely no doubt that you are more effective once you have mastered your brief. And even if you're an expert in part of what you're doing beforehand, there will always be bits in your ministerial brief that are new or elements of it or even stakeholders that you haven't met or built a relationship with yet.

And so further down the line, it was comparatively a walk in the park compared to the early days. It was still challenging and hugely stimulating and a huge amount of work. But you got satisfaction from feeling you were doing it really, really well rather than all the time trying to build that picture.

NH: And how long do you think that process took to 'uncover the whole of the scratch card'?

JS: Well, let's think. So I went off on mat leave after a year and three months and I definitely felt like I was on top of things before that. So I reckon by about six months in you're doing it pretty well, I think. I mean I suppose the thing is it's not binary, so after three months you can breathe. After six months, you're maybe doing it pretty well and then you're really starting to perform by nine months. But I vividly remember feeling, you know, the final four or five months, much, much more effective than I had been earlier on. So I think you're on a trajectory that really can continue because your confidence grows as well and all of those stakeholder relationships too.

And also just your knowledge inside out of the issues. Because you're not just dealing with...I mean I remember I did a bill that had already been through its committee stage and I had to pick it up for the report stage. Now I was supposed to be the expert on the bill and yet there were a dozen or so MPs that had sat through hours and hours and hours of debate on that very bill and I hadn't been one of them. So things like that were really challenging.

Later on when I was leading legislation like the Children and Families Act, which I did with Ed Timpson [Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families], I did all the shared parental lead stuff. That was stuff that I'd helped develop the policy, you know, gone through all those decisions, been really involved in actually shaping it and then obviously doing second reading and committee stage. And so, again, when you've invested in the early stages of something it is much, much easier when you're doing the later stages. And it's not just about it being easier but you're also then better able to respond to genuinely make sure the House understands the consequences of particular amendments or clauses and that you can explain it or communicate it much more fluently.

NH: Based on your experience, how would you describe the main roles of a minister?

JS: So there are obviously various roles. Depending on what's happening at the time, part of it might be about developing legislation and shepherding that through Parliament and making sure that it is as good as it can possibly be before it gets to Parliament. But then you have that parliamentary process to make sure the finished product is the best possible. Now, that will vary hugely department to department. Some departments have hardly any legislation, others have quite a lot. I did quite a lot of primary and secondary legislation.

There's obviously the role of developing policy that might or might not turn into legislation. Sometimes it will be policy that is about using government's role to influence, whether it's trying to change culture or trying to change behaviours in other parts of society. Related to that policy role, there is the role that you have in your position of having a platform to help to shape that as well. And I think if you look at some of the things that we did on some of the equality issues, it's not that the legislative framework is particularly lacking, I mean we did some good stuff ultimately on pay transparency, though that was a bit of a battle to get, but a lot of the things about the representation of women in the media or body confidence, women on boards, you know, a lot of this sometimes it'll be actual programmes and sometimes it will be using the power and influence of government to really push an agenda. I certainly found in parts of my portfolio like equalities, it's much more about cultural change – that's where the main power of government lies. Whereas with something like consumer rights, then it's actually much more about making sure the legislative framework is absolutely right and then you've obviously got the enforcement mechanisms as well.

So you've got legislation, you've got policy impacting on culture, and hugely, obviously, is the role of Parliament in being able to be held accountable, to explain, to understand, to listen to what people are saying in your area of portfolio. Because MPs have a wonderful position that they come into contact with a wide range of members of the public or businesses and organisations and, therefore, that's often the

way that problems get spotted. And so, you know, somebody will be raising something in Parliament and it might be quite early days that that's a problem and six months, two years down the line it's a much bigger problem but you know, it started in one area or somebody was aware of it early on. So using that resource to see and respond to the things that are happening in your portfolio area is important too.

Jen Gold (JG): Thinking about the day-to-day reality of being a minister, looking back, how was most of your time spent?

JS: Well, I guess if you did a proper analysis of my diary you might get a very different view. It's hard to answer because it varied so much from week to week. So there were times in my ministerial life where I felt that I was living in Parliament. When you're doing committee stage for a bill, you're spending a huge amount of time actually doing the committee stage and when you're not in committee stage you're preparing for the next bit of committee stage. And also sometimes you will, out of your control, have large numbers of Westminster Hall debates to be responding to and obviously you have the regular sort of question time with oral questions, and select committee appearances. So Parliament is a big chunk of your time but it varies massively depending on what's going on.

I found stakeholder meetings were something that took a significant amount of time and it was interesting to try to work out the best use of your time. You're always analysing your diary in a lot of detail to try and work out how your time is best spent. And it's important to meet the stakeholders but make sure there's a good agenda. And how often you meet the stakeholders – some stakeholders you might meet as often as, you know, every month or every couple of months depending on if that policy area's particularly fast changing at that point, other ones you might meet once every six months or once a year.

Policy development – so developing ideas, consultations – you will obviously use some of your stakeholder meetings to be testing some of these ideas and then working through them with officials. And for me, I often quite like to do that face-to-face to explore issues. Different minsters have different ways of working to come to those decisions and then take those forward. And I sometimes find holding a round-table meeting if there were particular areas that I really felt like I wanted to explore more before making a decision that you could get some experts round the room and shed more light on it. So that would take another good chunk of time. And, again, depending on whether you've got a Bill, there was a point in my ministerial life where I just spent huge amounts of time thinking about all different aspects of consumer policy when we were putting together the Bill, now the Act.

A certain amount of time is spent on media stuff. That's, I think, a smaller proportion but obviously at certain key events then that would be more. There would be box time which is interesting because there's a tendency in the Civil Service to fill every minute of your diary during the apparent working day and then give you a box in the evening that's going to take you three or four hours to do. And when I started those boxes would often take me that amount of time. I had huge amounts of correspondence, lots of PQs [Parliamentary Questions]. I would have 30 different things in a box lots of nights. And particularly when a lot of the subject matter is new, then that takes a significant amount of time to go through. But at various points, we experimented with actually having more time during the day to do some of that stuff and particularly when I was heavily pregnant, you know, it was just necessary to run it slightly differently. And when I realised that you could actually do some of that during the day, then I thought that was something which was viable. That's because actually if you're reading through something and you think I can't really work out the right thing on this particular submission, well if you're actually in the office when you're doing that you just say, 'We'll ring the policy official, get them up'. And you can resolve in a 10-minute conversation what you might have scratched your head about for 40 minutes, wading through something which, as I say, didn't need to take that amount of time. So I think it's important you spend time on making those decisions and, therefore, doing some of that during the day is important. But you shouldn't have boxes for the sake of having boxes. And getting the balance between how many things you as a minister need to see versus not being totally swamped so that you can't spend enough time on the big things is an important balance.

JG: That's something we are quite interested in. How did you cope with those competing demands on your time? Did you develop any strategies or do you have any tips for others coming into the role?

JS: So this is why, at the beginning, it is so much more difficult. Because at the beginning I suppose a lot of this is about risk and, you know, what's the risk of something going wrong? And at the very beginning your knowledge of the portfolio area is less so you have to invest a lot more time to satisfy yourself that the risk of something going very badly wrong is low. And as you become more experienced, you have a more immediate sense of what policy areas and what types of thing are likely to be problematic and, therefore, what needs a bit more time.

One of the things that I would often find is if I sort of asked a few questions in response to a submission and then got slightly rubbish answers back it would start to ring massive alarm bells. I would then be a bit like a ferret and dive into it really deeply and probably ask so many more in-depth questions than I would have done on another submission where it had been presented in a way that answered all the questions and where when I'd asked for clarification I got a really solid response back because that sort of sends you a signal that this has been thought through and that all is in order. But where I started to get question marks that was when I tended to really unpick further. Without going into much detail there were examples of a consultation response, a course of action that had been pretty much sort of set that then I started asking questions and I thought this really, really doesn't make sense. I was sort of thinking is this just me that this doesn't make sense to? And I'd sense checked it with my private secretary actually as well. And she was going, 'No, no, no, I don't understand these answers that we're getting either'. And, you know, we ended up doing something entirely different. I'm absolutely sure that we made that right call and it was really just something that didn't add up in an earlier submission that I got that led to unpicking that.

So I suppose there's a degree of trusting your instinct. You look for signs of whether the controversial issues have been flagged up to you. Also, you get a feel for, bluntly, which officials you really can trust in terms of there'll be some people who you've dealt with for months and you realise they have excellent judgement and if they're explaining that this thing is fairly uncontroversial or they say that these groups are very happy with it then you trust and believe that. Again, you don't know that at the beginning when you start out, which people you can have that relationship with.

And then the other thing is to be a bit ruthless. The Civil Service is very responsive actually. I definitely didn't realise this at the beginning. You know, people have very different preferences in terms of how they like briefings. I know there were ministerial colleagues who that said a letter will never be more than a page. That's not something which I implemented but I loved the idea that you could have a rule like that and that it would be stuck to. I had a rule that Parliamentary questions would never be late. I was sick of it. And I just thought a Parliamentary question has to be answered anyway, and so you may as well answer it on time. The same with correspondence actually, although with the volumes it wasn't as possible to get to 100%. But after I made that decision basically from December 2012 onwards, I never once answered a written Parliamentary Question late. And once you set that expectation the Civil Service just responds.

Sometimes if I was reading through a submission and it was far, far too long and detailed and they were giving eight pages when they should have given you one, I eventually sometimes just stopped at the point that I thought I've got another 25 things in this box and sent it back and said, 'No, this is too long, I need it one page'. And you don't need to do that that many times. And then that does change behaviour.

So I think you can't be superhuman. There are only so many hours in a day and, frankly, getting no sleep is not a successful way to be a better minister. Therefore, if it is becoming unsustainable then you need to find ways in which your time can be better used and things that are wasting your time – whether it is unnecessary meetings in the diary, whether it's far too much detail on issues that you really need the top lines on – then those things can be culled or reduced. And actually private secretaries do an excellent job in reading through documents and saying, 'Here are the really important sections that are going to be important because of the issues you're interested in, because of the politics or whatever and I've gone

through it and proof read'. And, you know, you don't want to be proof reading documents as a minster.

JG: And I wonder if you could talk us through an occasion when an unexpected event or even a crisis hit the department and how you dealt with it?

JS: Goodness me. I'm just trying to think of the right example. Unexpected events? I'm just trying to think. I mean there's whole parts of the department that just work on unexpected events such as, you know, major companies going into insolvency. I can think about a particular EU judgement but I don't think that the details of that should be shared publicly. So, yeah, that would be a good example but I don't think that's for public consumption.

JG: Maybe you could talk us though your approach to dealing with unexpected events and how you liked to make decisions more generally?

JS: Yeah. I think in terms of principle, the first thing is to get the information that you have available. It may well be that you find out about something as a minister but you're going to have to wait a few hours before you can be properly briefed on it and that's because the officials need to go away and do the gathering of information. And that's fine, but good for you to be aware of it, that further briefing will come. And that will typically be face-to-face briefing. There would often be something written to accompany it but then you would actually have a face-to-face briefing, be able to interrogate and ask questions, think through different alternatives.

With things like EU judgements, you would know it was coming. You wouldn't know what the judgement was going to be and so there would typically be some scenario planning. The Civil Service is quite good at doing this scenario planning. So you'd receive this submission saying next week we're expecting a judgement from this case, we obviously don't know what it will be, this is what we think is likely, if this happens then this is what we could do.

There will then typically be communications handling in that and decisions about at what stage should certain things be public or not, what is in the public interest, whether it's something which warrants a statement to Parliament, for example. Transparency is, I would say, a starting point — in general a good thing, but you often have to also weigh up whether there are unintended negative consequences of doing so in terms of whether people's jobs will be put at risk, for example. And so sometimes those are quite delicate decisions.

And if it's a very serious issue then the Secretary of State will be involved as well and that would depend on the sort of severity of the issue. And typically, I suppose you'd have fairly regular contact while that issue was live and ongoing with key officials, normally at director level – the director generals might or might not be involved, it would depend – but often the director is going to be of sufficiently senior level but also sufficiently across the detail to be able to do what's required.

JG: And what do you feel was your greatest achievement in office?

JS: I will forever be delighted that we have implemented shared parental leave. That was something I campaigned for in opposition and when I was offered the job by Nick [Clegg], my question to him was, 'Do I get to do shared parental leave?' And he said, 'Yes'. And so I was over the moon at that.

To really make that a reality there were quite significant battles within government – even after the initial primary legislation was passed, in terms of the secondary legislation as well. I had to really drive the communications of that. And I have to say I found, you know, during the election I was on knocking doors and I met this lady and she was eight months pregnant. I sort of said, 'Well, when are you due?' And we had a bit of a chat because obviously as a fairly new mum myself it's a sort of issue of shared experience and she said that her and her husband were going to be using shared parental leave. And I have to say I went home that night from canvassing really over the moon and delighted. And it happened again, I met some friends just after the election who had just had another little girl and they're using shared parental leave. And I don't think that's ever going to stop giving me thrills that this is really making a difference to people's lives and I think it'll be a change that stands the test of time.

JG: And what factors do you think were key to that success?

JS: Well, first of all, an unbending focus. You know, everybody in BIS could tell you that that was my priority, even if they were working on the Insolvency Team, frankly. And you know that might have been slightly depressing for those teams where it wasn't the top priority – I still gave time and attention to the other parts of my portfolio, I was very dedicated – but I was also very clear that that was my priority. And, therefore, I would have more meetings about that.

If things were problematic I would expect to be told, you know, where things start to get stuck in government. Sometimes things get a bit stuck and delayed a few months or whatever and you have to live with it a little bit. You've only got X amount of political capital and you can't spend it on everything. But on this I wasn't, frankly, happy to live with it. I mean not least when I came into the portfolio it was due to be implemented in October 2015. And I said, 'Sorry? October 2015? That's not just a six-month delay that's irrelevant, because that's a pretty key six months, there's an election in the middle of it and we don't want anything to risk this'. So I was absolutely determined to make it April. I think using, therefore, your political capital wisely is key.

I had significant support not just from the Secretary of State but from the Deputy Prime Minister, so I knew that if I was getting stuck on something that ultimately I could ask that to be escalated and that I would have the support that I needed on that. So that significant support within government was really important as well.

We did a lot of media on it and it was something which got very positive reactions from media and that helps you make a case for it within government because it makes it harder, it increases the cost, if you like, of opposing it. So that public awareness of it was also really important. And I was passionate about it and I think inevitably people do things better if they're passionate about them. I always find that with civil servants, I think that's the same for ministers, if you really care about something and, frankly, it's true of every job that I've ever done, that if you care about it then you will do a better job.

NH: You talked about the Secretary of State. You obviously had a fellow Lib Dem as your Secretary of State. Do you think that made a difference?

JS: Yes, I do. I mean it was the only department where that was the case. And it made a big difference because I knew that there were certain issues within my portfolio that Vince took a particular interest in – particularly in corporate governance, he'd done the Kay Review, long-termism and so on. So on those issues we very much worked in tandem. Obviously he had to look after an entire department and so he was very happy for me to get on with it, frankly, in other areas.

That also meant really that I think people in the department recognised that if I wanted something to go through or to happen then there wasn't really this, 'Ah, but Secretary of State might disagree' sort of view because people really knew Vince would back me up on things. I'm hugely grateful to Vince for that because it gave me a sort of, I think, an ability to get things done that was probably more than most junior ministers would enjoy and certainly I know that the experiences of some of my Lib Dem colleagues in other departments could be very frustrating at times depending on the relationship they had with their Secretary of State.

I also obviously experienced... I had a Lib Dem Secretary of State in BIS but I had a Conservative Secretary of State for equalities and the contrast was quite marked. And that was an area where there was often a lot of tension across the coalition. So it was lovely at least on some parts of my portfolio to know I could just get on with it.

NH: Vince had a couple of special advisers as well. Did you interact with them?

JS: Yeah, absolutely – very strong relationships. And they were very different as well. So for most of the time it was Giles and Emily and latterly Ashley replaced Giles. And Emily, you know, dynamo, fantastic with the media and communications, getting stuff to happen, shaking things up if they needed to in the

department but very, very well respected, even when she was prodding to get action on things. And she was really helpful in advising and helping to make sure that on key issues that I needed to really drive that I was able to do so and use the media to achieve these objectives.

And then Giles was totally different — very outwardly relaxed, reflective, into the detail of everything, very thoughtful and would really get into a policy in great depth. And so when it came to sort of discussions with Number 10 about whether or not you could get policies through and you would get into that negotiation, I mean Giles would just nail it by understanding every aspect of policy but then also not argue it in a political way, he'd just like argue the economics of it and say, 'Well, you know, your position just doesn't add up because the way I look at it is this…' And almost because he wasn't saying, 'Because we're Liberal Democrats blah…', he had great success. So yeah, I worked very closely with both Giles and Emily and obviously latterly Ashley. And, you know, I think they did a smashing job.

NH: So what did you find most frustrating about being a minister?

JS: In some cases it's frustrating that there's this learning curve and you get really quite good at something, and I suppose a lot of ministers have experience of just getting to that stage and then they get moved on which must be hugely frustrating and at least didn't happen [to me]. But I suppose that of the time that you're a minister you wish you could have been as effective in the first part as in the latter part.

Sometimes the Civil Service can be really frustrating. But equally, I sort of learned to love them in a strange way and you end up with a bit of a meeting of minds. And the challenge that they give in sometimes doing a kind of sense check or a risk check. They can be too risk averse, my goodness, Civil Service lawyers sometimes really would have you do nothing. But sometimes it's a valuable point to put across and say, 'Have you thought about this consequence and that consequence?' and so on.

I think to be honest, the most frustrating thing was some of the things you wanted to do but couldn't because you were in a coalition basically. Particularly when there wasn't any good reason not to, obviously in my view there was no good reason. But even there were some issues where… So, for example, I really enjoyed working with Oliver Letwin [then Minister for Government Policy] because he would generally genuinely take an issue on its merits. You know, a hugely intelligent guy and he would get into the detail of all sorts of different issues and if there was a kind of problem across the coalition then Oliver would get involved from a Number 10 perspective and you could go and have this meeting with him and you'd just really quickly get into all the detail of it and work out the issues. And sometimes you would come to a position where you would realise it was because there was a fundamental difference of viewpoint between the coalition partners and so it wasn't going to be resolved. So maybe it would be something that ultimately became a bit transactional; we want this, you want that, well okay but in this other area we want this and you want that so, you know, we'll do a deal. But at least you could understand what that was and although I might not agree with his rationale for something he would have a rationale and I could understand his position.

What I found the most frustrating was where there was just a kind of, 'No, no, Number 10 says no, that can't be done', where it made no sense. You know, 'Can we sign up to something which is absolutely in line with all the principles of this government and doesn't commit us to anything additional?' 'No'. 'And that we have actually kick-started the process of developing with other countries?' 'No'. And I still to this day just don't know the answer to why. You know, 'Can you actually make progress with the will of the House of Commons that the Government is then committed to implementing proposals to outlaw caste discrimination?' And you just get this weird amorphous 'No'.

So I would say those were the things that were the most frustrating. You couldn't really unpick what it was. At least when there was a clear difference of opinion and you could understand where they're coming from, even if you don't agree with it, that was a bit easier.

NH: From your point of view, how could government be made more effective?

JS: Well, I've already talked a bit about how the Civil Service and Parliament understanding each other more would be more effective. I think a key thing is about how you use ministers' time. Part of that is about not moving ministers too often. I think that's now quite well understood. But also really a discipline within the Civil Service, Whitehall and, indeed, even ministers themselves to be able to focus on certain areas and see the things that they need to see rather than getting lost in the woods and spending a lot of time on things which are less important.

So I think I sense that's probably one of the biggest challenges that governments face because you have a fixed number of ministers; that is, you know, enshrined in the statute. Well, I suppose you could have endless Lords ministers that are unpaid. But basically you have a fixed number of ministers. There's always more issues to deal with. You know, most ministers have very broad portfolios. Mine certainly was huge and, therefore, really managing to focus on what are the things that need ministerial attention, what are the things that actually are not controversial, are fairly technical, the Civil Service is perfectly able to get on with; that distinction is important.

NH: On that point regarding your parliamentary role, you obviously had a constituency that was quite far away, how did you manage that alongside being a minister?

JS: Well, it was actually, in a sense, because it was so far away it almost in some ways made it easier. So I was used to, first of all, not being able to do physical constituency stuff during the week. Obviously I could do correspondence and telephone calls and so on but I was used to, during the parliamentary week, physically not being able to be in my constituency. I did it once and resolved never to do it again. You know, you do the 1,600 miles in a week rather than the 800 and it didn't leave me in a very good state to be working. So basically that meant that when I was in London I was doing parliamentary things, as I say, apart from telephone calls and emails and letters and so on. And then when I went back to the constituency that was it, I was doing constituency stuff. They would send a box sometimes to the constituency at the weekend. But from my perspective, that wasn't problematic. And we would just make arrangements for that.

Your constituency office staff need to do quite a lot of liaising with your private office staff because they're both managing the life, if you like, the diary of the same person. And sometimes you need to do constituency things during the week. Sometimes if I had constituents visiting Parliament, for example, then I would want to make time to go and see them or I would need to perhaps speak to my case worker about particular cases that were ongoing. And occasionally if I was in the constituency there might be some emergency, something that needs to be signed, something that needs to be looked at, and it happens to be on a Friday; that happens. So they did need to do quite a lot of liaising.

I think there were a couple of occasions where I was doing a ministerial visit in Scotland and we tried to make sure that we actually got the Private Secretary that was with me for that to come into the constituency office and physically meet people. And whenever I had my constituency staff come to Parliament, as they would do for training once a year or something, I would say come and just spend, even if it's just a couple of hours, come into the department, maybe sit in on a meeting if there's something that wasn't confidential to get a bit of a feel for what I did and to meet the staff. I think that a physical face-to-face meeting is actually really important to get a good way of working, particularly with the diary but even on other issues. So yeah, that understanding constituency-wise was important as well but just to be fairly ruthless about this is constituency time and it's really important. And actually they were quite good at recognising that. I mean some ministers are in on a Friday but most of them are in their constituencies and so they're pretty much used to that.

NH: You talked about frustrations with the Centre. Did you have to do much work with other government departments? If so, how did you find that kind of coordination across Whitehall?

JS: A bit. On payday lending that was an issue that I shared with the Treasury. And, again, I had my fights with the Treasury on that. On employment tribunals, I had to deal with the Ministry of Justice and that was very painful. So it would depend. But then on issues like immigration then BIS would be dealing with the Home Office but also, say, FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] and you would get

a weird scenario where the battle lines were drawn not necessarily between the two coalition parties, but you would have the Foreign Office headed by a Conservative and, you know, BIS headed by a Lib Dem agreeing on the positive benefits of immigration and the need to have an efficient system that didn't feel like people were being driven away and yet the Home Office would have a very different approach. So I think it depended a bit on the issues. And different departments seem to have very different cultures. I always find it interesting when civil servants came to BIS from a different department to kind of pick their brains a bit on what it was like because they all have their own character, obviously huge power in places like the Treasury and the Cabinet Office and obviously Number 10.

And obviously with equalities you'd be dealing with lots of different departments. And I would say in that it was often more about the minister. You know, that could really make a big difference. So if you wanted to get traction with some equality issue in education, or justice when Helen Grant was Minister of Justice and Equalities then it was quite easy. And Liz Truss [then Minister for Education and Childcare] was really up for things and, you know, initiatives in schools to encourage girls to do maths and things like [that]. A lot of it depended on who the minster was.

I actually am quite a fan of having double-hatted ministers. I think that worked quite well in preventing the silo mentality. I mean certainly at the end, in BIS, I think there were only two ministers that were single BIS ministers and that was Vince and Baroness Neville-Rolfe – though I think she's now actually shared with DCMS. But the Trade Minister was shared with FCO, George Freeman for Life Science was shared with Health. I was shared with DCMS for Equalities. Ed Vaizey was shared with DCMS for digital stuff. Greg Clark was with DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government]. Matt Hancock with DECC [Department of Energy and Climate Change] and Nick Boles with Education. But actually what that meant was you actually had a sort of way into different linkages being made.

NH: Out of interest, did you have a private office in each?

JS: So I had a private office in BIS which was where I based myself and one of the private secretaries was from the Equalities Office and for me that worked very well because I wasn't back and forth all the time. Equalities officials would come to brief me in BIS, I would hold my meetings there but you also were under the skin of the staff there because you actually had somebody who got that. And I think for me that was very important. At one point they were thinking they would have a BIS person as the private secretary looking after the Equalities staff and I resisted that because I said you actually need to understand the people and the, you know, the culture of the department and so on.

It's a fascinating role that your private office plays and a really effective private office can make such a difference. And I felt that my private office, especially once we got up and running because we were all learning at the beginning, it was quite a thing to behold when it was really functioning. They were using their Civil Service network to make things happen and making the best use of your time, they know what your priorities are, they're able to communicate your wishes to the department and to do so with a degree of confidence, sometimes without even running something past you because they know. So by the time something gets to you it's already been thought through in terms of what's needed. So a good private secretary is worth their weight in gold.

JG: And the Equalities Office switched to [the] DfE [Department for Education] towards the end, so I was wondering whether that had any impact on...

JS: It was a bit ridiculous. It wasn't really switched to DfE. All the officials are still with DCMS apart from the Press Office switched to DfE and the ministers sat in their own sort of departments. My view on that, by the way, is that that doesn't work brilliantly, that machinery of government changes are hugely disruptive to the employees and just take a lot of energy that, you know, you could do without expending on that.

I argued and I would still argue that it should have one further machinery of government change, it should go to the Cabinet Office which does cross-government stuff because equalities is, after all, across government. And whoever are the ministers, they should be double-hatted with whatever the other job that they do, if they're not purely doing equalities. Cabinet Office within government has a certain status

and, frankly, equalities should have that, and to be blunt, didn't always have. So I think that's the best thing. Then it's there and it doesn't move and it can get on with being a centre of excellence across government to pursue the aims of equality.

NH: Based on your experiences, how do you define an effective minister?

JS: An effective minister knows what they want to achieve and uses their skills, their influence, and their political capital wisely in getting there. They use the expertise that the Civil Service brings, the individuals within their private office, within their party – whether it's special advisers, whether it's using the media – to help achieve that.

And I think an effective minster will also have a relationship with Parliament that is a constructive one. And no minister is always going to be doing things that are universally popular in all parts of Parliament but Parliament is important because at the end of the day, every single person in the country is represented by somebody that is in that House of Commons. And, frankly, whatever party they're from, that member of the public has got as much right to be represented to government as anybody else. And so while obviously there are issues that will be very politicised then also making sure that ministers are open to people of all parties and taking seriously the concerns that are raised, you know, across the House, I think, is also part of being an effective minister.

NH: Are there any bits of advice you would give to someone who was starting as a minister for the first time?

JS: Yeah. Don't worry, you'll be okay. At the start it is overwhelming and that's totally natural. I suspect that not enough ministers would necessarily admit to that in the same way that not enough MPs would admit that the first time they ask a Prime Minister's question they were terrified. But you know what? I think if anyone says they weren't then they're probably lying. It is a huge responsibility and a great privilege and so it is entirely natural that people will feel daunted by that prospect.

At the same time, if you're put into that role you've got a duty to do your best. And so I would say be yourself. And, you know, trust in the skills that you have and that you can bring to it. And recognise that you will be better in month three than you are on day one and that's okay. The key thing is that you keep learning to get better and that you ask for advice and for help when you need it. And I think very often that will be forthcoming within the Civil Service and from ministerial colleagues and even from people that have previously done the job because even from across different parties, you still want the governance of the country to go well. Certainly when I was a PPS, I asked advice from the only people I knew in Parliament who'd been PPSs before and they'd been Labour PPSs because we'd had 13 years of Labour Government. But they had no problem at all sharing their views. So that's my advice.

NH: Is there anything you wish you'd done differently with the benefit of hindsight?

JS: I mean there are certainly decisions that I've come to regret and in some cases managed to make future decisions that sort of changed things again. But I suppose all of us can make poor decisions but I think some of the things that I regret, based on the information I had at the time, were straightforward and sensible, but perhaps there was a further question I should have asked or, you know, in some cases whether you got given information that wasn't quite right or just that, you know, hindsight's a wonderful thing. So there's things that I'd have done differently but I think at the time it might have been difficult [to know].

In general, not recognising early enough how much of an impact you can actually have, the position of power you're in, the ability to get the Civil Service to do what you want it to do. But part of doing the job is learning how to that because it is a difficult system to get your head round. So if I had my time over again I would do things quite differently in some ways.

NH: Is there anything we haven't asked about that you were dying to get off your chest or that you'd like to raise?

JS: I think the only other thing I would say is I think the Civil Service gets criticised a lot and I recognise that in some cases in this interview I've expressed my frustrations with the Civil Service. But I have to also say I was incredibly impressed by so many of the officials that I worked with at their dedication and quality and expertise. And, therefore, as an institution, you know, the impartial Civil Service, it is something which is for a country very much worth being proud of. It enables ministers to come in with different political priorities and it just then moves to shape, to implement that. So I would say I think that's something to be very much respected. Obviously, always you look to improve things of course.

And the work that the Institute for Government [IfG] does is also really important and I had some very helpful engagement with IfG doing 360 degree feedback. It was very useful to get a feel from people who are then able to speak in confidence – whether they were fellow ministers, whether they were more senior ministers, whether they were your officials – to give you feedback. And there were definitely things I used from that to become more effective.

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