

# Ministers reflect

John Healey

May 2016



## John Healey – biographical details

### Electoral History

2010-present: Member of Parliament for Wentworth and Dearne

1997-2010: Member of Parliament for Wentworth

### Parliamentary Career

2015-2016: Shadow Secretary of State (Housing and Planning)

2010-2011: Shadow Secretary of State for Health

May-Oct 2010: Shadow Minister (Housing)

2009-2010: Minister of State (Housing)

2007-2009: Minister of State (Local Government)

2005-2007: Financial Secretary (HM Treasury)

2002-2005: Economic Secretary (HM Treasury)

2001-2002: Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Department for Education and Skills)

*John Healey was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Ines Stelk on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.*

**Nicola Hughes (NH): If you think back to when you first started as a Minister which I think was 2002...**

**John Healey (JH):** 2001, to the Department for Education and Skills [DfES]. I was the first Adult Skills Minister to be appointed. I think I did it for less than a year before I then went to the Treasury.

**NH: What was the experience of coming into office for the first time like?**

**JH:** I had been the Chancellor's PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary] for two years, so I had absorbed almost on that principle of sitting next to Nellie, seeing ministers performing and operating well, particularly in Parliament, and performing badly. I'd seen some ministers in the Treasury struggling with officials and I'd seen ministers leading meetings, broader meetings, very effectively. So I had seen a bit of action.

I had no training beforehand, no training after, no support after and I had a big, fat lever arched file prepared by the department for new ministers which I never got to read. I had no brief from the Prime Minister when he gave me the call to appoint me to the job. I said 'Thank you very much Tony, do you have any particular priorities for the role?' – which seemed to floor him. And he said 'Oh, um, well Stephen Byers [then Transport and Local Government Secretary] will talk to you about that' and actually he'd appointed Estelle Morris [then Education Secretary] to the job by then. But it was in the middle of a reshuffle which in parts had proved quite difficult. And [it was] a new role – so essentially I had the freedom and luxury and scope to define the role and the priorities for myself. That was good. So my first question of the senior civil servants was 'What are the problems, what's going well?' and we took it from there.

**NH: Can I dig into a couple of those? First of all, you said you'd seen some examples of good practice from other ministers – how did that manifest and was there anyone that you saw as a role model or a particularly effective minister?**

**JH:** Well, being Gordon Brown's PPS, he was a particularly effective minister. He was a particularly effective minister in the department, and in the House of Commons. What made him effective wasn't just [that] he was in a position of unique authority as Chancellor of the Exchequer, but he was very clear what he wanted to achieve and he was very clear about what he wanted always to say. And I think those, really those two things, that clarity of thought, serve you well in whatever circumstances you're in, whether it's wider public meetings, the House of Commons chamber or essentially management and policy meetings within the department.

**NH: And the second thing you were talking about was the lack of training on offer. As you know this is something we talk about a lot...**

**JH:** We all hope it's better now. [laughter]

**NH: Well we hope so, we're trying! But do you think it's possible in our political system, because there's still quite a lot of ambivalence about training?**

**JH:** Yes, of course it is. Why should it not be possible? Why should it be impossible in any system? These are specific roles, with responsibilities set out clearly, a number of people who have done the job beforehand, a rather imprecise management structure, it has to be said, inevitably, but of course it can. And it should.

#### 4 Ministers reflect

**NH: Then if we move onto the Treasury, did that feel like a very different department to work in?**

**JH:** Yes. How was it different? It was much tighter, it was much smaller, it was all in a single location, so when I was Adult Skills Minister the policy officials in my area were in Sheffield, so for instance in the recesses I set up my private office in Sheffield, because we live in Rotherham. Which was, from a minister's point of view and I think from the civil servants' point of view, a great thing. Because I met and saw and was able to have discussions with civil servants who were not senior enough to qualify for the train fare down to London to meet ministers. I ran across civil servants in the canteen, or just walking round the floors that I would never have come across. And I got a feel for the depth and breadth of expertise that was there that I would never have done simply through the submissions that came to me as a minister down in London. For civil servants to see a minister eating egg and chips next to them, or to be walking through the corridor and being able to talk to them, I think was really good, on the whole.

**NH: And then DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government]? It's different – again, how did you kind of get into that job and get a feel for the department there?**

**JH:** DCLG was... I think what you have to hope, in life as well as in ministerial career like any other professional career, is that you do learn as you go along. You get better as you go along and you don't make as many mistakes or take as long to get to do the things that need doing the further you go. So five years in the Treasury, having seen seven finance bills through Parliament, done two spending reviews, to be able to go into local government, having dealt with a number of the policy areas relevant to them for five years in the Treasury, including for instance local and regional economic development, the prudential borrowing regime for local government, a number of things just really helped. And what also helped was understanding there, what I didn't understand when I first went into the DfES, was that it isn't just the relationships in the department that count, you have to set up clear relationships, understanding clearance to give yourself the political and policy elbow room often with Number 10, Number 11 and other departments. And how you do that, and how you set that up from early days is really important. So I was able to do, as part of the 2008 spending review which I was in the DCLG at that time, I was able to do the first ever three year funding settlement for local government, because I understood how the spending review process worked and because I was able to have those discussions early enough with Treasury in order to make that happen. And I wasn't reliant on – this is the other lesson I think for all ministers – you can't simply rely on the civil service system to deal with the difficulties and the differences that need to be resolved. Often the best and fastest way of dealing with things, and getting a sort of settled understanding and way forward, is to do that minister to minister, to do that politically.

The biggest risk for ministers I think, reflecting on nine years in government, is you become isolated in the department. Not just prone to that departmental mind-set which people often talk about, but isolated as an elected political figure in that department from the rest of Government and from your colleagues in Parliament. The support, the communication, the sharing of both good and bad experiences and solutions should happen a great deal more amongst political and parliamentary colleagues than it ever did. You can't simply rely on the fact that you have a handful of close friends. I think that consciously must be structured into the way that the political part of our executive is structured.

**NH: It's interesting, a few of our interviewees have talked about similar things to this, including networking by spending time in Parliament and not forgetting your backbenchers and that side of things, but also about committees and the more formal structures...**

**JH:** Yeah, you see when you talk about networking that is essential for you as a politician, for your own sort of political position and base, absolutely essential. I'm talking about that also for the purposes of being a very good, effective minister in government and playing your political part of our governance and leadership.

**NH: Yeah. The other aspect people have spoken about was Cabinet committees as a kind of way of getting ministers working together – but people haven't been terribly enthusiastic about how well those work.**

**JH:** No, Cabinet committees are an administrative arrangement that is designed to give the political stamp to the civil servants' ability to sort out differences and difficulties in advance. There were very few Cabinet committees where, in my experience, really serious arguments and debates took place, where decisions that haven't been essentially prepared in advance were taken. The best committees and the best ministers of committees were those that didn't simply see it as their duty to turn up with the lines to take from the department and simply argue the narrow departmental corner. Some Cabinet committees were chaired in a way that tried to minimise that, some Cabinet committees deliberately set out to operate in a different way. So we had for instance a Cabinet sub-committee that was for the designated ministers for the regions. And the principal role of that was essentially to bring the perspective from the different regions to the centre, to share it, and to decide together whether there were therefore actions or arguments required to the centre and to Whitehall as a result of what we were picking up from the regions. Different dynamic, different role and really a different quality of debate.

**NH: Just one more on how you make things work inside departments. How did you establish good relationships with your secretaries of state in those different places?**

**JH:** On a personal level, I tried to have good relations with whatever secretary of state came and went. But by and large my approach was really to try and carve out areas for which I was directly responsible, able to make decisions and therefore minimise the need to refer to the secretary of state and I was always very... clearly sometimes you had to get that clearance and cover. I was always very reluctant to have the secretaries of state take decisions, any decisions, in areas that I was responsible for.

**NH: Did that always work?**

**JH:** Largely. And so when we came on to when I was appointed Housing Minister in June 2009, I formalised that. So when Gordon Brown spoke to me about taking the job, by then this was in a sense the eight years of experience in Government, so from the word go I got confirmation in that first conversation with Gordon that I was reporting directly to him and the Cabinet on housing and planning, not to and via the Secretary of State, that he wanted... you've got to remember we were still in this period where we were trying to pull the country out of a deep recession caused by the global financial crisis. He said he wanted to do more on housing, as part of the economic stimulus, so I confirmed that. And that allowed me then to say to the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary, 'This is the appointment I have had, this is the relationship that I have with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet', and it allowed me to say to the Cabinet Secretary, 'We have to do more on housing as part of the economic stimulus, we've got to find some switch spending from other departments'. And so we were able then to switch nearly a billion pounds from other departments into the house building programme and so essentially... I talked about headroom, elbow room to act and to decide and that's what we did. At the same time also, set up a direct working relationship with the Chief Executive of the Homes and Communities Agency which was my delivery agency, so that wasn't mediated for me: minister, senior civil servant in the department, Homes and Communities Agency, and so it was a way of cutting through what otherwise could become... what would be the right term... certainly removed the filters and removed some of the inbuilt delays and inflections that you sometimes see in a system of government, in which you have to deal with a number of layers.

## 6 Ministers reflect

**Ines Stelk (IS): OK, so thinking about the day to day reality of being a minister and the competing demands that you had, how was most of your time spent?**

**JH:** Blimey. Well you've got to remember I'm an MP as well and for me first and foremost I'm elected to do that job. That was always my first message to any new private office. The second thing was to fix an away-day for the private ministerial office in the constituency, where they met the constituency team and saw for themselves what we did in Rotherham and what life was like. So if you start with a week, I took the view that they could have me Monday to Thursday, but on Friday and Saturday I was full time an MP and dad, and Sunday I was a dad. I would use to drop my young son off at primary school on a Monday morning, get the train down and come back. It didn't matter how late, they could have me as long as they wanted during that time, but that was that. Down here as a minister, working day generally, a standard mix really. It would be based in an office in the department, largely, meetings with the senior officials, outside organisations some of the time, particularly if necessary to vote over here. Generally trying to catch up on paperwork for a good part of the evening and then knocking off pretty late in the evening.

**IS: And could you talk us through an occasion where you had an unexpected event or a crisis that you had to deal with and how you dealt with it?**

**JH:** An unexpected crisis? OK. The summer floods, 2007. I was Local Government Minister. I'm taking a crisis to mean how we deal with it in government terms, that's what you're interested in, really? OK, so we had huge areas of the country flooded. Not generally the areas that were susceptible to flooding, because two thirds of the flooding was run off, rather than rivers overflowing or coastal defences failing. So large areas, never been hit by flooding before, very badly hit. It was necessary that government, nationally, demonstrated first a huge sympathy, support and a rapid response to help those families and businesses that were hit, and secondly that that was not just a response that was led by a single department. So, for instance, as Local Government Minister I ran the established scheme, the Bellwin scheme for reimbursing costs to local authorities, but that was totally insufficient to deal with the imperative of the moment or the extent of the flooding. So again, getting the Prime Minister's personal commitment to that response and getting through him, charged with coordinating a, not a Cabinet sub-committee, but essentially the key operational delivery ministers from about half a dozen different departments, including the Treasury, meeting regularly as required. So you had a degree of coordination, you had the imperative to act that meant the system reacted quickly and our civil service and government does work well in response to crisis. We did in the much bigger crisis with the global financial crisis and recession. But again, we set up then, and I was part of this as Housing Minister, not just at Cabinet, we set up the National Economic Council. So we set up not a Cabinet sub-committee but a special structure there, this was secretaries of state and people who were running the programmes or responsible for the programmes that were making the difference. Whether those were a boiler scrappage scheme or our house building programme or whatever else were the components at the time. So we did that and the third most important thing about the floods was that our commitment to continuing support and concern didn't disappear with the flood waters and the media attention. And so it wasn't just what we did in Westminster, I had those ministers and did a great deal myself out visiting flood hit areas well after the floods had gone, because it takes months for those areas and those houses to get back on their feet.

**IS: And you continued to have those meetings all together?**

**JH:** Yeah.

**NH: On the visits, how did you make sure you were getting good, meaningful stuff from them that you could take back and use? What sort of benefits did they bring, those visits?**

**JH:** Well, I think they brought benefits in a number of ways. They brought benefits in purely, we underline and continue to underline the fact that national government wasn't walking away from these areas or moving on and turning our attention to other things, because they were still struggling. It brought great advantages because first hand we saw what people were struggling with. So we introduced, for instance, a no strings, no conditions grant for the first time, within days, via local authorities, for flood-hit families. We didn't put the normal central government strings on that, say to local authorities the eligibility for this needs to be X and Y, the level of maximum spend is Z, but it was 'You use this in the best way.' When I coordinated the first meeting of the chief executives of about 18 authorities that were worst hit, told them about this special floods grant, one of them said to me, one of the leading chief executives said to me, 'Can't you tell us how to spend this, because we are going to get criticism from our neighbouring authority if we spend it in a particular way and they are doing something different.' I just said 'Look you're in a position to...' – normally as Local Government Minister I'd get arguments for more devolution, 'Don't make the decisions for us, let us do it for ourselves!' and here we had the reverse. The main thing was they did it and it was much better done that way. It was a sort of ironic early part of the conversation as we got used to working with each other.

**IS: OK, and what do you feel was your greatest achievement as a minister in office?**

**JH:** There's probably two answers to that actually. The Small Breweries Tax Relief, which has been a big part in the explosion of independent new breweries and the reestablishment of the craft beer market.

**NH: Lots of my colleagues will appreciate that. [laughter]**

**JH:** But the sort of serious answer is undoubtedly what we were able to do in the teeth of that deep recession. To start building more homes, including getting local authorities building for the first time for a couple of decades, at scale. What we were able to do through the mortgage rescue scheme that kept people in their own homes when they were threatened with repossession and bankruptcy. And being able to do all that within just 11 months before the 2010 election. If we'd had longer, we could have done a great deal more – but then that's our democratic and electoral system. Our time was up.

**NH: Did either of those prompt reflections on how well you thought the policy process worked in government?**

**JH:** Yes. The Small Breweries Tax Relief was an idea that came up from a particularly bright, able customs official and I was the Customs and Excise Minister at the time. So it tells me that there are some really excellent, as well as expert, officials in the Civil Service. Not enough, not consistent enough, but they are there. Part of what you get to learn as a minister is that you find them out. You try and find them out early, you try and work with them, you try and give them the responsibility, you try and clear the path for the people that you know you can rely on. And I think we've talked a little bit about how, after eight years I had a very clear idea about how I needed to set up the arrangements to be able to do what I thought was needed with a very ambitious housing contribution to the economic stimulus that was the national imperative at that time.

**NH: On the other hand, was there anything you found frustrating about being a minister?**

**JH:** Yeah, lots. [laughter]

**NH: Top three.**

**JH:** The first thing to say is it's a very special position to be in, and by and large, I think the scope to make of it what you want is much greater than is often understood or said. So that's the first thing. The frustration, the tyranny of the daily diary, the tyranny of the ever refilling red box and the ministerial correspondence... you do learn to set certain sort of operating rules for your private office and they in turn are able to say things, 'You didn't make that clear to the civil service system.' But there is, especially

## 8 Ministers reflect

at junior, middle and sort of engine room level of government, there's a great deal of stuff to get through and I think sometimes more than necessary, so that's one thing. Two, I found the risk of becoming isolated in the department a frustration and a weakness. So I was Housing Minister for 11 months, June 2009 to May 2010 and I didn't have a single meeting with a DWP [Department of Work and Pensions] minister about housing benefit. I think those are...what else? Was the question what I found frustrating?

**NH: It was, but I know you have to go as well. Anything final on that, or any top pieces of advice, top tips that you've not mentioned and wanted to cover?**

**JH:** I think I've touched on some of them. Value your political colleagues, your greatest asset is your private office, make decisions, be clear what it is you want to achieve and be conscious that in mapping a path to achieve that you also have to do some of your own ground-clearing, so in other words you have to set up the arrangements that give you the best chance of succeeding. You can't simply assume that the civil service system or the Cabinet sub-committee meetings, or somehow the discussion that may go on between secretaries of state is going to do that for you. So it's essentially, in summary, it would be take charge to the maximum possible extent that you can within the role that you've got and the position that you've been asked to take.



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2 Carlton Gardens  
London SW1Y 5AA

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7747 0400

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

Email: [enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk)

[www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk)

@instituteforgov

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