

# Ministers reflect

Lord Howell

December 2015



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## Biographical details

### Electoral History and House of Lords

1997-present: Conservative Member of the Lords

1966-1997: Member of Parliament for Guildford

### Parliamentary Career

2010-2012: Minister of State (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)

2005-2010: Shadow Deputy Leader of the House of Lords

2000-2010: Shadow Minister (Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs)

1981-1983: Secretary of State for Transport

1979-1981: Secretary of State for Energy

1977-1979: Shadow Minister (Business)

1974 (Jan-Mar): Minister of State (Department of Energy)

1972 (Mar-Nov): Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State

*Lord Howell was interviewed by Jen Gold on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project*

**Jen Gold (JG): Obviously you've got a wealth of experience going back to the Heath and Thatcher governments. If we just start in 2010, could you tell me a little bit about your experience of coming into government at that point?**

**Lord Howell (LH):** In 2010, yes, well ministers for the Lords come into the Government in various ways. My induction process began with a call not from the Prime Minister but from the Leader of the Lords, Lord Strathclyde, who said there was going to be a need for a minister in the Foreign Office. I had had this discussion with Thomas Strathclyde before the election on the assumption that we would either win or have some kind of coalition, because he asked me would I be prepared to do it. As I had been Opposition Deputy Leader for six or seven years, and throughout that time and before that time, opposition spokesman on foreign affairs, I was the obvious person to ask. I said I wasn't sure because I'm not as young as I was and I might do it for a couple of years.

So the day comes and there I am, somewhere around, and the telephone rings and Thomas Strathclyde says, 'Shall I tell the Prime Minister you're the one to do it?' So I said after a little umming and ahing, 'yes' and repeated the two-year limit. He said, 'There's no pay of course'. And that is always the slight problem because grandparents always have expenses and I did have some consultancies, which you immediately have to give up. So I took a deep breath and said 'Yes'.

So then the next thing is I do get a call from the Prime Minister saying how pleased he is that I am on board and this, that, and the other. I had said previously to Tom Strathclyde, as I had a fairly long record – not a criminal one, a ministerial record! I had been a secretary of state, I wasn't too happy at just going in as a sort of parliamentary secretary spokesman. If I was going [in], I would want a serious job in the Foreign Office and I wanted to be a minister of state. And Cameron said, 'Delighted, that's fine, we're very pleased to have you on board'.

Then I get a call from the new Foreign Secretary, William Hague, and he is very pleased, because we've known each other for many years. I think two calls. And the second call is about what sort of areas, he's dividing up the areas in the Foreign Office. One general area is that I'm involved in everything because I have to answer questions on everything in the Lords, unlike ministers in the Commons who only answer questions on their particular area. So I have to cover everything. But in addition he wanted me to specialise on the Commonwealth and to become a proper minister of the Commonwealth, which hadn't existed for some years because in our enthusiasm for Europe we rather [it] chucked out. There used to be secretaries of state for the Commonwealth, then there were ministers and then in the last 20 years there had been nobody. So I was the first minister for the Commonwealth for many years.

Also, because of the fact that I have been Energy Secretary and I've always kept up with energy issues and I'm deeply involved in all sorts of energy policy issues around the world, 'would I look after international energy security?' I think there was one other portfolio he gave me as well but I can't remember what it was at the moment. So that's a rather unusual way to end up in office.

So then I go round to the Foreign Office. I'm quite busy on the Monday, I go there on the Tuesday and all the Commons ministers, I think there were three others in the Commons over and above the Secretary of State, have all moved into their various offices. I said, 'Well shall I move in?' because there'd been a previous [Lords] minister under the Labour government, I think Lady Kinnock had been the Minister of State. I said, 'I'll have her office'. 'I'm sorry that's not possible', they said. They were very surprised to see me turn up at all, and I said well, 'I've been appointed, I'm going to need an office here'. They said, 'We'll prepare an office for you but it will take three weeks and in the meantime you'll have [a] temporary office'.

So I had a temporary office. And I walked in [and] I said, 'I want my desk computer, my PC'. They said, 'But ministers don't usually have PCs. It's all done through a private office'. I said, 'I'm very sorry but I need a PC. Firstly, I need it because I'm going to be rushing backwards and forwards to the Lords,

literally rushing along the pavements, down past the public loos, out the other side through the corridor to get into the chamber in time to answer questions, and therefore I've got to keep absolutely up to date with what's going on in the Lords otherwise I can't do the job. And secondly, I want to be able to communicate with my advisers, with outside possibly, with other parts of this office and indeed with my fellow ministers'. They pulled a very long face but produced a computer. Then I said, 'I want to be able to get access not just [to] Foreign Office things but my parliamentary email as well because it all goes together, it's all the same job'. And that was very difficult. But eventually I think I just bulldozed my way through.

So after all that I at last had a computer to enable me to do my job. And I then I got into the routine at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and met a lot of the senior people and had a chat with the Permanent Under Secretary, some marvellous people I'd known for years and so on and got into the job. But that's all rather unusual. It's not the usual. When I was in the government 20, 30 years ago, of course, it was quite different.

**JG: And on that contrast with your previous periods in government, was there anything that particularly surprised you?**

**LH:** The really big thing, which I've actually written about, comparing the 1980s with the 2010s [is that] when I ran a department in the 1980s as Secretary of State, I would begin with a morning meeting with ministers and later on we'd call in the press people and the PR people and say, 'This is where we're going, this is how we're going to handle A, B and C. This is our defensive position here. This is a new initiative we're taking. This is the way and it's question time today in the Lords which will be this, that, and the other'. Or, 'I'm just about to go off to Saudi Arabia' and so on and then discuss the presentation of what we're doing.

Now my impression of the Foreign Office, 25-30 years later, was the other way round. The first call, the first people into the Secretary of State are the PR people and the press officers to work out where the hell we're going, what are they saying, what are the media saying. Then later on in the morning the ministers are brought in to work it out and knock around the great policy issues and problems and events. So there you have, I think a very, very symbolic change. Because the government is at this side of the internet revolution in the 2010s, they are looking over their shoulder and very much more governed by the bombardment of public opinion and media opinion and the vast range of media links. The governments in the 1980s, 30 years ago, were able to proceed on a certain line and deal with the media afterwards.

**JG: And do you feel there's any difference in the support that's available to ministers coming into office now, in contrast to what you experienced in the '70s and '80s?**

**LH:** No. I didn't think there was much difference there. Excellent private offices, extremely helpful. Obviously perhaps I was getting a little more help as an old minister of state because I was having to handle such a broad range of things, but excellent people. I think perhaps a more relaxed attitude actually. When I first went into government in the 1970s there were sort of terrifying people all the time telling you what you couldn't do, whether you could sneeze, you know! There was a particular, I won't even call her by name, let's call her Mary, who was absolutely a terrifying lady, who was in the Civil Service Department in the Northern Ireland Department. I mean any idea that you might have a ministerial car to rush you from your constituency, anything to do with politics or Parliament, she would absolutely be shocked beyond belief. There was no question of mixing up anything. As a minister you were hardly allowed to breathe!

So that was back in the '70s. But I think, perhaps it's when one gets to more senior positions, and after all we really were and novices in the '70s, but I think a much more relaxed and realistic attitude. So it seemed to me in the '70s, the restrictions on ministers were frankly totally unrealistic. It was impossible to do the job with half of the restrictions if you obeyed them all the time. You certainly couldn't get from A to B.

**JG: And when entering the Foreign Office in 2010, did you have a sense of your initial priorities in the role?**

**LH:** Yes. After all I have been involved in foreign affairs issues, as I say, I go right back to being the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the '90s – '87-'97. And I've always been involved, not always, because I was more of an economist in the early days, but anyway since the mid-'80s, in international affairs. And I had some very clear priorities. I won't say they were everybody else's. Yes, I did. Absolutely.

**JG: Having been a Lords minister and a minister from the House of Commons, are there any differences between the main roles and duties?**

**LH:** Not vastly, except of course, in the Lords as the only Foreign Office minister. There were Foreign Office questions nearly every day, I was much more having to be there at 2.30 of an afternoon, Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays at 3 and Thursday at 11. You had to be on your toes and ready to answer questions. That said, the Lords is an easier place to answer questions in, or used to be.

**JG: In what sense?**

**LH:** Its more, people don't interrupt and shout at you and so on. Or they didn't. I think it's changing now. But it's a much more congenial atmosphere and you accept a little more of the light-hearted responses, and a good joke takes you a long way. Whereas the Commons can be quite nasty. Quite nasty. And you need to get it right. While I was doing about 10 times as much in answering questions – remember in the Commons the Foreign Office had sort of one every three weeks, and then there's five ministers and one minister might have two questions – in the Lords it was four, at least four or sometimes six or seven questions a week. So I was doing about six times. Also as one gets, dare I say it, older you learn all the tricks and so you learn how to get around the awkward corners and how to answer the questions about 'When did you stop beating your wife', which come pounding in. So you learn and you can get more done and you're able to coast along.

But even so it had to be an intense briefing. Now the briefing in the Foreign Office is extremely good and as I was doing questions every day there was a briefing practically every morning with officials from some part of the Foreign Office, many of whom, very varied questions would come in the Lords, and you would suddenly find yourself contacting all sorts of agencies and bits of the Foreign Office you didn't even know existed. Full of experts – they were, on the whole, really good. Sometimes the briefing came out totally contrary to what I really thought was the right answer. I would try and make a compromise between my absolutely determined beliefs to go in one direction and what the Foreign Office official might want in another. And you can do that subtly. But it's got to be very subtle, there's no use standing up and saying, 'I don't agree with my brief' and so on. But no, on the whole, it was extremely good.

**JG: You've touched on part of this answer but I am interested in the day-to-day reality of being a minister and how people's time is spent. You mentioned the morning media briefing but just in terms of some of your other daily activities, what did a typical day look like?**

**LH:** Again, both in my job as Secretary of State for Energy and in this last one, in the Foreign Office, possibly less so in intermediary jobs in Northern Ireland, Employment and god knows where else. What other departments are there? The Civil Service Department. A large part of the job is travelling so you've got to combine answering the questions, and I did have a very supportive deputy, a Lib Dem, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, who occasionally stepped in for me when I was physically on one side of the world and was supposed to be answering a question in the other.

But building in the travel was quite tricky. What it means [is that] as soon as the House rises you can really go on the long journeys. On the whole my big trips, which were involved very much with the Commonwealth, where they really needed your feet on the ground in the Commonwealth capitals and so on. And my trips to do with international energy took place in the recess when they rather irritatingly

told you you were on holidays – of course, you're not on holiday at all, you're probably working harder than normal!

I tried to be back in Parliament for questions and a lot of debates as well. There's a lot of one-day debates in the Lords. They always like debating foreign affairs a lot. So there were lots of one day debates on foreign policy views. And then on top of that, there's the lobbies, the meeting of people who want to come to see you, the writing of briefs inside the department, arguing things out on which way we should go on this, that, and the other. And bills and legislation – the saving grace of the Foreign Office is there's not very much of that. [But] when it comes it's a whopper. I mean all through the summer of 2011 I was handling the Europe Bill which was the one that put a cap on so there had to be a referendum of any further transfer of powers to the European Union. Immensely complex, up against some huge experts in the Lords and in that sense it's more difficult because actually a lot of people in the Lords know a hell a lot about it, whereas in the Commons they don't. So if you're weighing it all up, Commons v Lords, that's more on the difficult side. On the other hand, you're dealing with more savvy people and more experienced people and it's a nicer atmosphere.

**JG: And in your role in the Foreign Office, was there an occasion where you had to deal with an unexpected event and can you give a sense of how you went about dealing with that?**

**LH:** The instinct of a department when there's unexpected events is immediately to have a meeting and decide how to resolve it and try and evaluate it. 'Is it this? Is it that? Where does it come from? What reactions does one take to handle it?' But yes these came up in the Foreign Office.

The world is full of unexpected events and they did come up all the time. Some could be anticipated. Some you anticipate but everyone else says, 'No, no, that won't happen, it's ridiculous' and it does happen. But when it does, it's not us just saying 'I told you so'. Well it has happened, we've got to deal with it. Yes. That's the way. You'll scoop around or your private office scoops around for the best advice from the whole machine.

**JG: Were there any particular unexpected events that you had to deal with or were the responsibility of other ministers within the Foreign Office?**

**LH:** I think what happened after 2010 that began to start to shake the whole, oh dear I need my memory jogging here, but there were constant ructions on European issues. There were constant problems popping up, oil and international energy and nuclear issues. I had some things where I was answering in the Lords, I had to say, 'Can I come to this meeting because I'll have to answer questions on it, it's not my subject but I'd like to deal with it?'

There were endless international terrorist events, horrors in Algeria, threats here and problems in Russia and so on. I'm trying to think whether the sort of hot issues of this moment, now we're talking, had all begun by 2010. Not really, the Russians are still well behaved and hadn't got going in Ukraine. The China and Japan issues were reasonably settled then at the beginning. Europe was bubbling away as it always is. What other things would have been on our plate then? I'll probably think of some as we go along. There always is a sense of something popping up that was not in the script.

**JG: And what do you feel was your greatest achievement in office, something that you are particularly proud of?**

**LH:** Well first of all, in the sense of the things that I think are important that I have been involved in for years, and that way in office you can give them a push or add to what you were doing anyway. This will shock you slightly [but] you are less empowered in office than out of office to carry them forward, some great causes.

Obviously, I had a picture of the world, which I think was partially seen by some. In the whole, as we moved into the second decade of the 21st Century, the whole world picture was changing. The whole



nature of international affairs was changing from hierarchies and superpowers towards networks and much more fluid regional arrangements. And I saw the UK as really beginning to have to shift its post-war default position which used to be 'For god's sake stay in there with Washington, look what they did to us at Suez' [and] saying 'our destiny is in Europe, we've got to be good Europeans, we've got to support the United Nations and that's it chaps'. To a different vista opening up of, 'Wait a minute all the growth and dynamism is actually going to be in Asia and Africa and maybe Latin America and of course, we must stay close with America they're big and powerful, but what about building up all our links? If all our trade and markets are going to be largely outside Europe, what about the rest of the world?'

And Mr Hague, the then Foreign Secretary, did recognise very strongly that we had to open up what were first called rather patronisingly, the 'developing countries'. But that phrase is now out of date because many of them developed far further than we have.

I was keen to ensure that Britain should begin to reposition itself for these new markets and use all of the available assets. And one of the assets, which needed to be revived, because it was practically moribund, was our links with the other English working-language countries – the 2.3 billion, one third of [the] human race who are in the Commonwealth. This was the network of a dream in every other country and every minister is saying, 'You're so lucky you're British, you've got this ready-made network'. It doesn't take you into China obviously but it takes you to India, which is next to China. It takes you into Hong Kong which used to be a part of our system and network and is still very British even though it's in the PRC [People's Republic of China]. So I was determined to try and revive the realisation that we could play the network game – we the British with the Commonwealth.

Networks are not the same as aligning yourself with a particular block and saying, 'Well, it will always be the American special relationship, it's been with us since the war'. That all needed looking at again. A relationship yes, but a different one. 'The destiny is in Europe and forget the rest of the world', that all needed revisiting because the whole of Europe is in need of reform. And here we are five or six years [later] right in the middle of everyone saying it's not just Britain versus Europe, it's the whole European system that's got to be brought into the 21st Century.

There is also the change in the nature of international diplomacy itself in the digital age, where one has to deal far more with much wider and more informed audiences and networks. And in fact you're aware of what has come to be called 'soft power'.

So those were the sort of changes I was trying to achieve. Did I achieve them? I got on my way. I gave them a push along the way. And I think the realisation that we were in a completely new world network, has dawned on the most die-hard thinkers in the Foreign Office. I think the realisation that we have to use soft, smart and hard power together, you can't just talk in terms of whether we send in troops or not. I think that had grown and I helped contribute to that.

Since I left the government we've done a lot of work in the Lords on that, as you may know. The Commonwealth as a network was very difficult to get going again because there was so much historical baggage. So many hang-ups on the past [and] so much difficulty about was this new network Anglo-centric? Was it just a rehash of the old British Commonwealth, or was it a sort of a new network? The dawning realisation suddenly that it wasn't, although a lot of small islands and impoverished countries, it wasn't a handout and aid and so on. It actually contained, I think seven or eight of the richest fastest growing markets in the world. And we needed to get in on them because our so-called partners in Europe were thinking not so much about being a partner but getting in there first before us. We found our partners very un-partner like in some areas. So that's been a battle. It continues.

I think the penny has nearly dropped that Britain is in an entirely new situation and we have to be very agile and we've got to settle Europe and that's going to be frighteningly difficult. We've got to stay partners with the Americans but not for god's sake be their subordinates or clients. And the Foreign Secretary, Mr Hague, when he had been Leader of the Conservative Party in opposition, he had some very good phrases, one was 'In Europe but not run by Europe', which for a time was considered too risqué but now it's very much the thing.

The other phrase he had about America was that our relationship is ‘solid but not slavish’. Now so much was that controversial that when I was urging him – because part of the story I haven’t told you, is because I have been a speechwriter in the past for Tory Leaders I know a bit about speech writing, he took quite a lot of advice from me on his speeches – and at one stage I suggested we should resurrect this excellent phrase he’d used and there was a sort of silence and a suggestion that the Cabinet Office didn’t approve, I think on [President] Obama’s visit here or something like that.

So you can see how all these tensions were all swirling round and people are only slowly adjusting to our new possibilities in our new potential in the network world. But I have written books on it. It was very much something I was able to push forward. There were some around the Foreign Office machine who didn’t like it because they were geared to the past and ‘Europe, Europe, Europe’ and all that. A lot of highly intelligent people in the Foreign Office recognised that we were moving to the digital age and everything was going to be completely different, as it is now proving to be.

**JG: So were you working or engaging much with the trade minister in the Foreign Office? Obviously it was a split role with BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills].**

**LH:** Yes. Stephen Green. Yes, quite a lot. I mean we’d meet two or three times a week. He was organising literally hard trade involvement and trade missions and so on and I was sort of advisory to those. I think on one or two cases, I actually stood in for him and did them. The trade, pure trade, was slightly different, was at a different level. That was dealing with trade and businesses as in where we are now. My operations were trying to shift the whole scene into a different one in which actually trade links would look rather different than as they are now emerging. I’m afraid this is not yet fully understood. The entire nature of the trade links and business links in the modern world is quite different to what it was 10 years ago, let alone 30 years ago.

So all this is going on. But what did I achieve in my two and a half years? There is a story about that which I will touch on later. I think I did help accelerate what was already an eye-opening process that my god there’s the rest of the world and we need to get on quickly and link up with it. That international diplomacy changed completely in the digital age, with much wider audiences, different languages, different techniques or instant connectivity, so on and so forth. And that the Commonwealth is not to be discarded in the attic, while we concentrated on Europe but a very, very useful network for the future.

**JG: And one thing that will have changed since your earlier periods in government was the role of special advisers. I wondered in the Foreign Office, did you have any contact with special advisers? Did they help with your role in any way?**

**LH:** Yes. There were some around. The Secretary of State had some. I didn’t actually feel I needed special advisers frankly. I had been myself a special adviser in the past and there were quite a lot of things I had done in my tenure on the Foreign Affairs Committee. And having covered all these things and been involved in all these organisations, I felt I didn’t really need a special adviser. I liked to write my own speeches, which I could do very quickly. There were people who were around who were very good speechwriters who seemed to be shared between the ministers. And they could produce very good drafts, which you could then adjust to your own needs. So that was really how the spads [special advisers] came into my domain. I think they’re very different in different departments.

**JG: Yes. I’m sure. And you mentioned your private office and I just wondered how you went about setting that up?**

**LH:** Well it’s set up for you in the sense that they suggest a private secretary or you inherit one in some cases. I mean going back, roll back to 1980 when I became Secretary of State, I inherited the private secretary of Tony Benn who was my immediate predecessor as Secretary of State for Energy. And he was a terrific chap. They’re not allowed to tell you too much of what the previous lot said! There are one or two very amusing incidents that he couldn’t resist recounting and [he] obviously had a lot of experience.



So in 2010 I arrived, had a very good private secretary whom I immediately took to and he took to me. And we had three other people: diary secretary, office manager and somebody else, who were there. They came, some of them last a year, some longer, some go; you're more or less just informed who was going to fill the various jobs. You can't spend too much time beyond the key job of the principal private secretary, who has got to be someone you can get on with and so on. The rest is all determined by all the comings and goings in the whole department, which in the case of the Foreign Office, I don't know how many people they had moving around a bit. It could be in the thousands.

**JG: So in terms of that setup did you make any changes to suit your own working style or was it pretty much already functioning in a way that suited your needs?**

**LH:** I am trying to remember. You do ask people to do things. I think yes, they weren't, not all of them were used to the oddity that they were dealing with a minister who was constantly asking questions and I would rush across to the Lords. I think that's what I had to sort of explain to them, the physical facts: 'Look, I've got to be here and I've got to be there by 2.30 and I've got to be there'. And that I think, I just did bring into their thinking, yes.

**JG: And just in terms of working relationships with other ministers, I can imagine the Foreign Office might be quite unique in terms of how people are on overseas trips. So I wondered was there as a sense of a ministerial team that met regularly?**

**LH:** Yes. Oh yes. But that's a secretary of state thing and that I had seen from the other side having been a secretary of state. Obviously you bring your ministers together. I think we had morning prayers [team meetings] once or twice a week in the Foreign Office. I think – it's so long ago to remember – but in 1980, in the Energy Department I think I had morning prayers almost every day, or certainly four days a week, not on Fridays. And they're very, very valuable. They would sometimes begin with attendance by officials, the Secretary of State's private secretary or in my case when I want a secretary, my private secretary would be there to sort of catch the ball and take particular notes. But sometimes even they weren't there. Sometimes the ministers wanted all but ministers to be [there] and sometimes we would resolve ourselves into a parliamentary group [and] the Whip in the Commons would turn up and other people in the political layer. And sometimes, this didn't happen at the Coalition Government of course, but in party governments you do find yourself resolved into a party group. What's going on in the party? Where are we in trouble? Where we are not? Somebody this, somebody that. Who's up, who's down? And that would be not for the ears of civil servants we wouldn't want to sully their ears with grubby party talk [laughter].

**JG: With the coalition dynamic, obviously you've served in governments where it was just a Conservative majority? Was there anything that struck you as particularly different about the coalition dynamic or was it actually pretty similar to functioning under one party government?**

**LH:** Well, I think it was, but only in the last instance I was referring to was it not similar. I mean there wasn't one party in government there were two parties. And there were ministers in the Foreign Office, not in all departments, but at that time, the ministers of the Foreign Office were from both parties. If one of them was asking, 'Can I have party gossip and party talk' you couldn't, you didn't have it. But on the whole as far as ministerial work is concerned and departmental work, and the department's interface with Parliament and with other departments, through all the ministerial committees and things, which we haven't really discussed, it was very similar.

**JG: And was there anything that you found frustrating about being a minister?**

**LH:** In this last business? Occasionally things would be going on which they hadn't told you about, and why haven't they told you? 'Well you know minister somebody said this, somebody said that', wires would get crossed but I think that's inevitable in any organisation. But generally it's very good. Generally it turns a lot on who the Secretary of State is. Because in Northern Ireland with Mr [William] Whitelaw [Northern Ireland Secretary in the 1970s], he didn't move an inch without bringing in the ministers and I was nearly always literally physically by his side.

In the Department of Energy the first time round, not when I was Secretary of State but with Lord Carrington [former Energy Secretary], that was a bit different. Somehow Lord Carrington was so involved with the Cabinet we hardly ever saw him. The Civil Service Department again, the Lord Privy Seal was Lord Jellicoe. I'm afraid I'm back into the distant past of 1970. And he was a very nice man but in effect I was the Minister of the Civil Service. So I was in charge of the whole thing. He had other Lord Privy Seal duties. I was only a parliamentary secretary but I was really fulfilling the job of the Secretary of State, so it differs, it differs.

But it's up to the... if the Secretary of State can't be bothered with junior ministers or maybe, fighting for his life or something, you'll soon know it and the thing becomes very disconnected. The Secretary of State really keeps everyone together and tries to show that although his chief advisers may in fact be his permanent under-secretary of state and his civil servants, his advisers are his ministers as well. He's not making them feel like they just apparatchiks and all the business is being settled with the great mandarins. So I think that's essential otherwise departments do fall apart.

**JG: And in any of your ministerial roles were you working closely with other departments? I just wonder what were your observations of cross-departmental working in Whitehall?**

**LH:** A bit in this recent assignment at the Foreign Office, we were working with the Energy Department, not always 'with' I'm afraid, because my view isn't the view of some of the people in the Energy Department who were diverging considerably. And probably I was a damn nuisance to them because I had memories from the past, in a previous 30 years of energy work and the Department of Energy and Climate Change was a very different thing to the Department of Energy. It was the Department for Climate Change and 'oh incidentally Energy'. So I had relations with them but not always good ones, and with other departments at ministerial level.

At secretary of state level, if you're thinking back to the 1970s and '80s, somehow inter-departmental relations were much more regimented. I felt you were probably not allowed almost to talk to other departments unless you were given a brief in your hand and you were sitting in a ministerial committee, a cabinet committee or you were off to, in my case, off to Cabinet. And any other relations you might have with other ministers had to be sort of 'on the side' in the Commons when you met them informally or even socially. I think the inter-departmental, the joined-up handwriting doctrine had developed somewhat over the 30 years and there was a more natural and relaxed picking up the telephone, even of getting on the computer and having an email exchange with others in other departments; it was more possible. I have the memories of back in the '70s and '80s and it being extremely difficult trying to communicate with anybody other than in the absolutely formal rigid atmosphere of the Cabinet itself with minutes being taken and you're asked to speak or you're not asked to speak. And it can be very... it could be in those days, very rigid indeed.

**JG: And just based on your experiences of the decades, how would you define an effective minister?**

**LH:** Well there's so many different ways of being effective. Let me just illustrate that before I answer your question.

**JG: Sure. Certainly.**

**LH:** Take Mr Whitelaw. Mr Whitelaw was very agile on his feet in dealing with people and with charming people and so on. But he was not good on policy. Didn't really know about economics and so on and he was not terribly interested. He knew how to manage people. So he would get away with it in the Commons by being a bluff person and admitting he wasn't dragged down by a lot of detail. Rather a lesser version of Winston Churchill himself, who was proverbial for not knowing the detail of anything. And yet he was very, very effective, William Whitelaw, and he was very popular and people loved him. So if you can keep Parliament on your side and keep the party on your side, that is a great relief enabling you to get on with the main jobs of the minister and the department, and public policy and public interest and carry forward the interests of the nation. So that's one requirement of being an effective

minister. You mustn't be at war with Parliament or with your party.

It doesn't mean to say you've got to be constrained by everything the party or Parliament say but you mustn't be at war with them. If you can keep them onside then you can get on with your causes and carry them forward. So you've got to be a reasonably good performer at the dispatch box. You've got to have a sense of humour. You've got to do all that.

And then on top of that you've got to have the mind of a barrister or super-journalist being able to leap from issue to issue and keep a lot of facts and figures in your head and see things coming. And be able at the end of the day to say, 'Well, we are further forward on this or on that and the other'. A sort of an over-description, but it's roughly before you get onto the detail of what you're trying to carry forward. Those are the starting points.

**JG: Related to that, what advice would you give to a minister entering government for the first time?**

**LH:** Well funnily enough I did this in 2010. We had a meeting organised by Peter [Riddell, Institute for Government Director] in the Cabinet in the Old Admiralty, where I was asked to speak to all the new ministers, because neither Tories nor Liberals, most of them, had been in government before. This was 2010, I mean we hadn't been in government for 13 years. I think I said, 'In addition to what I've just said about don't get bogged down inside the party rank, don't get [into a situation where] people in Parliament are going to be unfriendly and unhelpful, solve all that. [You've got to] appear, be there, and turn up. It used to be in the smoking room but now I believe it's in different places people turn up. Be around and be one of the boys and girls.

Have your priorities, have your mission, have your view of how your show, your area fits into the broader scheme of things. Fit what you're doing, even if it's a minister of something really obscure, some minor divisions of housing or environment or something, always think how it fits into the bigger picture and talk the bigger picture and make interesting speeches. And if your department starts saying, 'Minister you can't say that, you can't say that', push it a bit. Don't go to the point of [briefing] The Daily Mail, as ministers divided or something, try and avoid the appearance of division but keep pushing the envelope the whole time. So I think that was my advice. I think one of your colleagues, a lady from the Cabinet Office, also spoke. She said just don't do anything that leads to a headline in The Sunday Times which was obvious stuff, but quite right. The main thing was to have your causes and your missions and see how they fit into the overall picture and if it doesn't fit your cause or the mission, try and change the overall picture.

**JG: Just out of interest, when you entered government for the first time in the 1970s did you have any induction or anyone who was a mentor who was there to give you advice?**

**LH:** No. We didn't. But we had a terrific mission. The Civil Service Department had just been set up. I told you I was a parliamentary secretary there, so there was a brand new department. In fact all my time under Heath and Thatcher I was constantly moving, starting up new departments. Northern Ireland was a new department when I went there. And the Energy Department in 1974 was a new department. I was almost first in with the furniture.

But remember that we'd worked enormously, a whole team of us on what we call a new style of government in the 1960s which was really indicating ways in which the centre of government, and the Prime Minister in particular, could have more power in questioning what ministers and departments were up to. Questioning them as to what their objectives were, making them define their objectives and define their mission and saying, 'Well, isn't this objective the wrong one, or isn't it one that will be achieved in a different way or contracted out or should you even put it into the private sector?' That questioning was requiring the Civil Service to be much more challenged than it had been in the past. And we brought this in as a way to start stirring. It was really the dawn of the privatisation era; didn't all work because Heath got bogged down whilst in trade union battles and Ireland and everything else. But that's where the questioning began and the word privatisation began to be heard.

So I was right in the middle of that and we'd been working on it in opposition for four or five years. So we very much had a mission there. And we didn't [find ourselves] being tutored by anybody else. They were coming to you and saying, 'What are you trying to achieve?' In the case of some of the senior mandarins, when they heard it they became very po-faced and were not at all enthusiastic. When we were told that 'this had been tried or didn't work, or it wasn't the right time'. I remember hymn 266, which is 'for those in peril', the middle line is 'I do not ask to see the distance scene, one step enough for me'. That's a Civil Service code and that's what you're warned as ministers you should stick to their lathe, answer the questions, deal with the crisis and leave such poor things as reforming the style of government to other people.

So we had an agenda in 1970, a very strong agenda. It didn't work because it was destroyed by other things, that's the Heath story, but we had a very strong agenda.

In 1979 we had a very strong agenda but it was very hard to get it going because the morning I became Secretary of State for Energy we were in the middle of the second oil crisis. I remember petrol at the pumps was going up by sort of 4 pence a week, it sounds nothing now, but then it was shocking. It took a lot of time to get our agenda, which was a privatisation one, free markets and so on related to the energy scene which anyway is a very governmental thing. Everything in energy is to do with governments, cartels and OPEC and politics and diplomatic and getting the market forces working in there is extremely hard. I found it a terrific struggle. But anyway, I think in all of the things I have taken on as minister, I've arrived with my own agenda and I think that's essential.

**JG: And you mentioned setting up new departments. There's always a long-standing debate about machinery of government changes and I wonder whether you had any observations, based on your experience, of when it's the right time to create a new department versus when it's a bad decision?**

**LH:** Yes. Well, I don't know. Because in 1970 we came in with a huge agenda of new departments. In fact, that's when the Department of Environment was invented. And we changed the Ministry of Labour, [it] became the Department of Employment. We had all sorts of new coordination mechanisms between departments. We even questioned whether the Treasury shouldn't have a separate department, the Bureau of the Budget, but that was slapped down very quickly by the Treasury mandarins.

What else did we change? I think in those days overseas aid which Labour had had outside the Foreign Office was brought back in again, which it should be now in my view. It's in completely the wrong organisation now. But I think a time comes when you realise the structures just belong to the past and it's just time to change. And I mean Labour invented this Department of Energy and Climate Change. So you've got a Department of Energy that I ran in the '70s, that was wound up and disappeared into the Department of Trade and Industry as it was then, before BIS. And then only came out again this time metamorphosed as the Department of Energy and Climate Change, halfway through the Blair government I think, because climate change began to be a fashionable cause.

In 1974 we were a brand new Department of Energy. I came back from Northern Ireland, there was no Department of Energy, there was nothing. And then suddenly the big issues of the world were the oil crisis, coal miners, nuclear – the lot. The portfolio I took on in the 1970s, 1979, was the biggest portfolio that any minister could possibly have. It included – we hadn't de-nationalised anything – so my portfolio included being on top of the whole coal industry, the whole electricity industry, CEGB [Central Electricity Generating Board], the whole gas industry, British Gas – gigantic organisation. Hobnobbing with the oil people – that wasn't nationalised but they would constantly come to the department. The entire nuclear industry was state-controlled; the whole thing was run from my desk. That's the biggest portfolio.

Hugh Fraser MP from the backbenches rather helpfully said I needed a bit of help, saying, 'Well, the Secretary of State is probably presiding over the largest portfolio of any minister in the free world'. And, of course, these things can get you down. I don't think I was too bogged down with it. I mean I argued with Mrs Thatcher which is I think why she moved me on to another department in the end. But I think, possibly I saw some of the problems from too many sides. I read somewhere that she thought I was too



hesitant but all I was doing was pointing out two sides to some of these colossal issues. That was a huge challenge. We began to divest to my successor, brilliant Nigel Lawson, began to divest some of it. Even in oil I was presiding over the British National Oil Corporation. So even oil I was in control of.

I was supposed to go to Cabinet on top of the accounts and investment needs of all these gigantic industries. Actually it was beyond human capacities. I always feel that, I don't know if you've interviewed John Moore [a Cabinet Minister in the 1980s], who was a brilliant man, but his problem was he got ill under the strain. But he was in charge of something called the Department of Health and Social Security. The whole social department, the whole welfare state under one minister – I mean unbelievable.

**JG: It's unmanageable.**

**LH:** And then he became ill. He had to resign. So we were dealing with really half the industry of the British economy and we were in a world oil crisis. And we had [Arthur] Scargill and co on our backs. I don't know quite how we survived. But there we are.

**JG: And in hindsight would you have approached any of your ministerial roles differently?**

**LH:** I would certainly approach it differently now. The difference is through time and experience you just grow more savvy about certain issues that circumstances are going to draw you into. When I went from Energy to the Transport Department perhaps I had grown tired, but I immediately got sucked into something which, if I'd been a little more savvy and experienced, I would have been much more careful about getting drawn into and that was, it sounds trivial, but the question of lorry weights, truck weights, weights of 32-tonne buses or 38-tonne buses or 40-tonne. The freight industry were lobbying furiously to get the things raised and all sorts of alleged compensations including the proposition which I should have spotted as really a sort of lobby verbosity; if we went out to bigger lorries and the fear of them. And you know, I should never have fallen for anything like that. So I think as you go on you do realise, you recognise the quagmires more quickly and the more you recognise the quagmires, obviously the more you can concentrate on the positive things and stay on dry ground.

**JG: And is there anything I haven't asked but you think it's particularly important to mention about the role of being a minister and the challenges that you faced?**

**LH:** No, I don't think so. I mean we've talked about the need to be on good terms with your party. The party and people on the back benches. You have got to be working with people in Parliament and you've got to have them on your side. A lot of time is spent by ministers sharing their problems with backbenchers and so on, a lot of sandwiches get eaten and a lot of drink gets drunk. Keeping in touch with opinion and spotting things that are coming up that are otherwise going to catch everybody by surprise. But we've talked about that, and we've talked about keeping in line with the party. We've talked about keeping in line with Parliament. And keeping in line with Number 10 is the crucial thing.

The department I inherited in 1979 from Tony Benn had declared 'UDI'. Tony Benn didn't go to Cabinet. So although he was a Cabinet minister he refused to go to Cabinets. Because he was so concerned with his own development of North Sea oil and all that, and he thought the Labour Party had gone in the wrong direction. And I can't remember, he didn't like Mr Callaghan. Somehow he was too powerful to sack, so he just ran a department out on its own, an extraordinary situation.

So one of my first tasks was to try and bring this rather enormous and strange Department of Energy back into the fold, which was difficult. Because at the Civil Service level there was a lot of antagonism between different civil servants and Mrs Thatcher had some very convinced views on who was good and who was bad. And actually she was very awkward. At one stage I think she said unless I got rid of my permanent under secretary, she wasn't going to talk to my department at all. So it was the other way round. She was really condemning us to isolation and it was difficult.



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