

Ministers reflect: on Parliament

Nicola Hughes and Hannah White



BRIEFING PAPER

About the Ministers reflect project

This briefing paper has been produced by the Institute for Government as part of the Ministers Reflect project. Ministers Reflect is a unique archive of interviews with former government ministers. It is designed to record – in their own words – what it takes to be an effective minister, the challenges ministers face, and what more can be done to support them in driving forward their policy objectives.

The interviews on which this briefing paper was based represent former ministers' own views and memories. They do not represent the views or position of the Institute for Government.

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Ministers reflect: on Parliament

Being an effective minister means [balancing multiple roles and relationships](#). For example, ministers have to be on top of technical policy detail in departmental meetings while also performing effectively in the media. But an effective minister cannot neglect their role as a parliamentarian – whether steering bills through Parliament, responding to scrutiny and representing the Government in the House of Commons or House of Lords, or maintaining links with their party and representing their constituencies.

Although we did not explicitly ask for their wider views on Parliament, the former ministers we interviewed as part of [Ministers Reflect](#) often touched on the need to balance their departmental and parliamentary roles, and expressed views on the part played by the Civil Service in enabling this. A strong and consistent message was that the civil servants working for ministers often did not understand or acknowledge the importance of the parliamentary side of ministerial life. “[Parliament] is almost the only medium in which you can lose your job in about half an hour”, said former Immigration Minister [Damian Green](#), “and a lot of officials don’t get that at all”.

For the ministers we spoke to, the disconnection between Parliament and Whitehall departments manifested itself in a number of different ways. To start with, many simply felt detached from politics when they became ministers and had less time, or inclination,

to spend time in the House. Some raised more specific concerns about the support offered by the Civil Service including inadequate knowledge of House procedures, failure to understand the importance of constituency work and poor support for speeches and debates.

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Damian Green

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In this short paper we draw together the views of the ministers we spoke to on each of these areas, and suggest some ways in which the Civil Service and Parliament could start to develop greater mutual understanding.

Time in the House

Ministers took different approaches to how much time they needed to spend in Parliament, depending on their own political style or in some cases driven by the nature of their department and role. However a common experience was feeling remote from Parliament, as [Tim Loughton](#) explained: *“you feel very isolated as a minister. You have to ask your colleagues what is going on in the House of Commons”*. Turning up to important votes is one thing, but effective ministers also need to keep networking with colleagues and stay connected to what’s happening in the political world outside of their department. As [Edward Garnier](#) from the Attorney General’s Office commented: *“it was important for us to be in the tearoom or to be in the Members’ Dining Room to connect as often as we could with backbenchers and other ministers, otherwise you get forgotten about.”*

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Tim Loughton

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Former Energy Secretary [Chris Huhne](#) agreed that networking in Parliament – if not spending time in the chamber – was useful:

“I would be in the lobby, I would talk to colleagues and people would see me in the tearoom and I would also generally one evening a week go and have dinner in the dining room on the late votes evenings. So I was accessible to colleagues and I think that’s very important. But in terms of actually spending time on the government benches, as little as possible. Very little happens in the Commons that is of any use if you’re defining your job in the way I’ve defined my job, which is to try and get the change DECC [The Department of Energy and Climate Change] is committed to.”

For other ministers, departmental business generally took the front seat, though they did worry about ‘losing touch’, as [Mark Hoban](#) said:

“I was quite surprised there are some ministerial colleagues who seem to spend more time in Parliament than in their departments, which I think is slightly odd. But I think it is very easy to lose touch with what’s going on and I did try to make sure that I would eat in the tea room in the evenings and stuff like that. But intentions of going across to the House for lunch did seem to disappear.”

The amount of time spent in Parliament is also driven by the minister's role. Secretaries of State tend to devolve most of the parliamentary heavy lifting, such as working on bills, to junior ministers. This may be behind [Vince Cable's](#) comment that:

"Parliament, I have to say we got quite remote from Parliament – that was one of the slightly surprising things about the job. We had our BIS [Department for Business, Innovation & Skills] questions once every four weeks I think – in any case it was at quite long intervals."

His comment also reflects the fact that some departments generate much more parliamentary interest than others. This was something [Jeremy Browne](#) noticed when he moved from a job at the Foreign Office, which necessarily involved a lot of travel and time away from Parliament, to the Home Office, which *"took its tempo from the House of Commons"*. He said:

"...about a third of all government legislation [comes from] the Home Office. It does hours in these committees which I relished less. I quite liked being in Parliament, some politicians don't like Parliament at all. I do quite like Parliament but hours and hours and hours and hours in some quite, you know, a committee on something that's just... quite the contrast from scoping out the implication of the rise of China to the regulations on dog leads."



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Jeremy Browne



Other ministers sought to actively engage with Parliament to promote their policy agendas, including [Andrew Mitchell](#) (previously International Development Secretary):

"...I was very keen to try and engage with Parliament, particularly the select committee – which of course was full of experts on it – as part of getting support for the case for development."

As [the Institute has argued previously](#), constructive relationships between select committees and departments can be mutually beneficial, but require active effort to maintain from both sides.

Parliamentary procedures

At the most basic level, some ministers felt that their officials simply didn't get how Parliament worked or the importance of ministers turning up for votes and debates. Of course, most ministers have a few years' experience in Parliament before entering government, so can be expected to know more about its conventions than their civil servants might, and – as members of the institution – to attach more weight to these. Nonetheless, these ministers perceived the gap as a problem. As [Hugh Robertson](#) explained:

“...one of the things that the Civil Service, bizarrely, doesn't do terribly well is Parliament. It doesn't understand it, and it doesn't understand the importance of a three-line whip, and actually, I sometimes thought if the Department for Culture, Media and Sport didn't get it, the Foreign Office was worse. They just about understand there's a Foreign Affairs Select Committee but they don't get Urgent Questions or anything like that.”

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Similarly [Jo Swinson](#), while admitting that as a backbench MP she had known very little about Whitehall, felt that understanding of parliamentary process was poor within BIS, though the secondment of a parliamentary clerk to BIS's parliamentary unit had helped the department improve its capability:

“But that sort of understanding is...few and far between in government; basic things like how adjournment debates work. Sometimes you just need to be reminded of something and I would say, 'Oh, can we just check is that in that backbench 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 realise I'd been given the wrong information. So, I think that there's definitely a real need for much better understanding on both sides between Parliament and the Civil Service.”

Tim Loughton, an MP since 1997, explained how he tried to bridge the gap at the Department for Education:

“...they asked me to give a talk to the staff about how Parliament works. And virtually the entire staff came. It was a packed room... a lot of them said ‘that’s really interesting, I learned a lot’. I mean it shouldn’t take a minister to tell civil servants how Parliament works and why ministers need to be over here for votes and running whips and all this sort of thing. So there is a bit of a disconnect between the government departments and Parliament as well. And of course your first responsibility has to be to turn up in Parliament to vote, to make statements, or take questions or whatever on your brief. So that was a weakness too.”

Many current civil servants have no prior experience of a time when the Government has had a [tight working majority in the House of Commons, and no majority at all in the House of Lords](#). In this situation the level of departmental understanding of basic procedural issues may well keep the Whips awake at night: every vote matters, so maximising attendance is important. Furthermore, when ministers are steering legislation through Parliament they need to minimise the amount of potential controversy and amendment, and avoid procedural blunders.

Speeches and debates

Another weakness ministers identified was Civil Service support around the specific tasks ministers were required to perform in Parliament, particularly speaking in debates. While some, like Conservative veteran [Lord Howell](#), found the quality of briefings for speeches excellent, others like [Simon Hughes](#) felt that they lacked political nous: “...people would give me very solid briefs for speeches in the House or speeches outside the House, but they often weren’t politically clever. And I pretty well always had to rewrite the material I was given...”. [Special advisers](#) were sometimes felt to be useful here, giving speeches more of a political edge.



Westminster was a completely strange animal and the Lords particularly was a strange part of that strange animal!

Lord Green



A particular group that found speaking in the House difficult was ministers who were also members of the House of Lords, especially those who had

come into government from business. As former banker [Lord Green](#) put it: “Westminster was a completely strange animal and the Lords particularly was a strange part of that strange animal!”. While the Lords might not seem as combative as the Commons, our Lords interviewees reflected that it was full of expertise and political ‘big beasts’ – an intimidating crowd. Added to this, Lords ministers are expected to speak on a much wider range of topics than their Commons colleagues.

As [Lord Marland](#), a former Lords minister at DECC who had spent most of his career in business, explained:

“...if you were not used to performing in that sort of scenario, and it is an incredibly special scenario because of the nature of the room – it is almost like being in the Globe [Theatre], you are in a pit and you have got a whole lot of things which you are not used to doing. You are not particularly trained as a public speaker and you are not particularly trained as an orator. Not knowing what the first question is and then not knowing what the other 20 are going to be is an ordeal”.

[Lord Livingston](#), another businessman turned minister, suggested a lack of direct experience in the House made it difficult for officials to understand the pressures faced by ministers:

“...I think one of the things I would say, probably in the Civil Service getting people who are supporting [Parliamentary] units to actually sit in the Lords, just to see what’s happening. A number of them had prepared answers to oral questions and I said, ‘Well you can’t quote this way’. I said, ‘Have you been to an oral question?’ ‘No.’ ‘Go to the next one and imagine you’re standing up and you’re giving that answer and you’ll understand why it’s wrong, why you just can’t say that and know you can’t do it in that way.’ And so that’s a problem. Officialdom is quite Commons-orientated, for the reason that the majority of ministers are in the Commons.”

Keeping up with the constituency

Commons ministers found some conflict between departmental time and spending time in their constituencies. Some, like [David Willetts](#), MP for the Conservative safe seat Havant from 1992 until he stood down in 2010, spoke of the ‘implicit contract’ with constituents on becoming a minister:

“...if the constituency know that you are busy doing something serious and occasionally see you on TV or hear you on radio doing something serious, they are willing to tolerate that you are not around as much. I think where the contract [breaks down], to put it crudely, is if you’re not doing something significant and high-profile and they still don’t

see you. It is one of the extraordinary features of the parliamentary side, is that it's a rewarding job that some people can do for every waking hour as a local MP.

But also I should imagine, David Cameron and George Osborne and even me as a busy member of the Cabinet, you may devote eight hours to it a week. But provided you turn up at the surgery and people know you will be around, they were incredibly tolerant of that. I had virtually no complaint, 'You didn't turn up at the jumble sale', 'You missed the meeting of the annual school prize-giving' because I was on a trade mission to India and they would accept that."

Those with tighter majorities to defend were more anxious about finding time in the diary for constituency matters. They would try and reserve evenings for casework as well as making it clear that they were unavailable to the department on Fridays. As [Steve Webb](#) said:

"...as a Lib Dem particularly, I'd always seen being a constituency MP as a full-time job. I suddenly acquired another one, where the department were fairly grudging about the fact that I had the first one to do at all. So I would routinely get to five or six o'clock and start the day's work as far as the constituency was concerned."

Many found it easier said than done. [Caroline Spelman](#), when Environment Secretary, "*really fought the department hard*" on "*not eating up all my constituency Fridays*". She continued:

"You can loiter in London, if you've got a big majority, you could stick around in London. You could do all the media – that might well advance your career at one level. But the electorate may react to that by feeling that they're not getting the service that they should, and I tried not to let that happen."

Good coordination between private offices and parliamentary staff helped some ministers, including former DfID (Department for International Development) Minister [Alan Duncan](#), to juggle constituency and departmental demands:

"What we managed to do was get a good working relationship between my parliamentary team and private office. The parliamentary team would come into the department, you know, straight up to the private office, they all knew each other. Alternatively, if there were votes here, the private office would come and sit in my office and get me to sign letters and brief me on whatever it was here. So a good working relationship between the parliamentary and the ministerial is important..."

What could be done to address these issues?

A lack of mutual understanding – and it is a two-way street – between Parliament and Whitehall departments came out very clearly in these interviews. Civil servants might well argue that understanding Parliament is a specialist skill required mostly by bill teams and private offices, that political nous is what special advisers are there for, and that it is up to ministers themselves to ensure they are staying in tune with the party and working the backbenches. Nonetheless, if the Civil Service wants to serve its ministers effectively, it must do more to diminish the perception that it doesn't 'get' Parliament, both technically and in acknowledging its culture and significance.

There are a range of initiatives, such as training and exchange programmes, many of which are happening already on an ad hoc basis, which could help build better understanding and ways of working between Whitehall and Westminster. But to secure a significant improvement in understanding that is sustainable in the long term, a more systematic approach to changing cultures and practices is required.



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Some of the principles underlying such an approach should include:

- **Clear communication of priorities and styles by ministers and their private offices** – for example creating routines and expectations around how diary time is allocated to departmental versus parliamentary or constituency business.
- **Opportunities for first-hand experience of Parliament and exposure to the ministerial perspective for civil servants** – for example through professional networks, secondments and shadowing, or talks and training sessions within departments.
- **Constructive joint working between official and political teams at the right points in the parliamentary process** – for example active involvement of special advisers, whips and principal parliamentary secretaries in policy development before bills are drafted.

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February 2016

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