

# Ministers Reflect: How to be an effective government minister

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#ministersreflect

Ministers Reflect

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# Ministers Reflect

Interviews on how to be effective in Government

This Institute for Government archive records – in former ministers' own words – what it takes to be an effective government minister, the challenges they face, and what more can be done to support them.

Liberal Democrat

## Jo Swinson

"There is no one way to be a minister and the best thing is to use your skills and your own strengths"

See interview

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SEARCH INTERVIEWS

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Coalition Government, 2010-2015

Recording in ministers' own words:

- What it takes to be an effective minister
- The challenges of being a minister
- What more can be done to support ministers in driving forward their policy priorities

# OUR FINDINGS

- Entering office
- Getting things done
- Top tips on ministerial effectiveness

# 1. ENTERING OFFICE

## *In 2010, ministers faced a challenging set of circumstances*

1

**The first coalition government in 70 years**

...the manifesto transmuted into the Coalition Agreement. So it was more complicated and it took more time to be able to re-focus on what we were meant to deliver.

– Mark Prisk

2

**A tough austerity agenda to pursue**

My very first afternoon in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, we all went into the Secretary of State's office... I think there were about 40 projects from memory, that were due to be funded over the next three or four years. We had to go through them all with a red pen, one by one, and we knew we could keep about five.

– Hugh Robertson

3

**Little collective knowledge on what being a minister was like**

...my party had been out of power for 13 years, so there weren't a lot of people knocking around who'd had experience of being in government.

–Caroline Spelman

# *Preparation for the role*

*It is always difficult to prepare for the realities of office –  
from the sheer volume of work to round-the-clock scrutiny –  
but some ministers felt far better placed than others*

## Experience mattered

### KEY VARIABLES:

- Experience working in large organisations
- Previous role in a government department
- Continuity between opposition and government post

...if you were to get thrown into any complex departmental area without having some previous period of absorbing the issues ... you were at an enormous disadvantage.

-Chris Huhne

# *The induction period*

**1**

**Many found the appointment process a little chaotic**

I got a phone call about ten minutes after it had been announced on Sky News!

-Lord McNally

**2**

**Private offices were the main source of induction support**

...the private office role was very significant for me because I hadn't a clue how government and the Civil Service worked.

-Steve Webb

**3**

**Views were mixed on the importance of more formal induction, mentoring and training**

What yet another tier of bureaucracy?  
No, no.

-Andrew Mitchell

The real revolution for politicians if you like would be to say 'we're now going to treat you like a manager in a company, and we're going to have development programmes and you're going to have training'.

-Damian Green

## 2. GETTING THINGS DONE

# *Establishing a daily routine*

## **Private offices were critical to establishing an effective day-to-day routine.**

- Assert control over their diaries
- Give clear instructions as to how information should be presented

## **1. High civil service turnover**

We were on our own during the forests fiasco, and we were without a permanent secretary, a head of news, and a director of communications right throughout that period, which was really hard.

– Caroline Spelman

## **2. A lack of understanding of Parliament among civil servants**

...one of the things that the Civil Service, bizarrely, doesn't do terribly well is Parliament. It doesn't understand it.

– Hugh Robertson

*Delivering results: What was helpful?*

## *Ministers relished the opportunity “to turn ideas into action”*

Establishing and communicating clear priorities was regarded as essential to hitting the ground running...

Knowing what you want to do and communicating it very clearly

- Liam Fox

...but ministers also recognised the importance of enabling effective challenge...

I tried to expose myself to stimulus. So to try and avoid the received wisdom, the departmental position and so on, I would actively seek out contrary views.

- Steve Webb

...and proactively engaging the centre

...let Number 10 know if there is something [wrong]. They don't like being caught on the hop

- George Young

## *Delivering results: Key relationships*

Well functioning ministerial teams tend to have secretaries of state who:

- see themselves as team leaders and maintain constant dialogue
- delegate responsibility on the basis of “earned autonomy”

...a good secretary of state will bring out the best in their ministers and enjoy their success. A poor one will be a control freak who tries to hog everything for themselves and in the end they are resented, of course.

- Alan Duncan

Most ministers quickly overcame initial scepticism over the need for special advisers

I was a bit sceptical of special advisers. Having been in government, they are absolutely essential – acting as an interface with the political parties and with other government departments and your political opposite numbers.

- Vince Cable

## 3. TOP TIPS: HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE IN OFFICE

## *Former ministers had the following tips for those new to office...*

**#1**

**Have a clear set of priorities (that are communicated effectively and relentlessly pursued)**

[an effective minister] knows their own priorities and makes sure they determine the timetable of the week and the month and the year and [doesn't] get hijacked by other people's priorities.

- Simon Hughes

**#2**

**Invest in relationships with Parliamentary colleagues**

I probably spent less time doing that than I should have done.

- Mark Hoban

#3

### Your public image matters

You have to push other things out of the way in order to spend enough time with the media... whether we like it or not, that's part of the process. And if people don't see you then they don't know what you're doing.

- Mark Prisk

#4

### Take advice from your predecessors

Talk to your predecessor to find out where the bodies are buried.

- George Young

...ask for advice ...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.

-Jo Swinson

#5

**Take staff engagement and people management seriously**

[a minister needs to be] good at generating a good culture within the department in which the people who work in the department feel proud of what the department achieves and feel appreciated for what they do.

- Caroline Spelman

#6

**Stay on top of your brief**

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.

- Lord Howell

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Minister

# Lord McNally

"Whitehall is a jungle and you've got to be able to stand up for yourself and take people with you"

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*Interviewed by*  
Nicola Hughes and Peter Riddell  
21 July 2015

*About*  
Tom McNally has been active in politics since the 1970s in Labour, the SDP

**Nicola Hughes (NH):** Thinking back to when you first started as a minister, I know you've had a long career in politics, but particularly focusing on the 2010 period, what was your experience of coming into government like?

**Lord McNally:** Um, chaotic. As you say, I had been in Whitehall as a special adviser in the Foreign Office and Number 10, and therefore I had, and still have, stories that start 'When I...' which caused great amusement



## 6 Ministers reflect

I tended to prefer briefings anyway on an oral basis. I preferred them to come and tell me about their problems, rather than wading through paper. And again, I think that was kind of my experience as a doctor. There's a lot of shortcuts you can get. Also you can learn more about the people you're talking to by seeing them face to face. And you can cut to the chase much more quickly. So that was a good relationship.

The Civil Service was different because they were also undergoing a period of transition. And there were big cuts going on. I think we cut 37% out of the whole Civil Service and we were altering a structure by looking at things like privatisation or procurement and so on. So there was huge upheaval on that side. And they were much less happy. Although I have to say in defence of the Civil Service unions that I dealt with, I always had quite a good relationship with them. I met with them and I was always very straight with them. And I took the very firm view as did the ministers, that there was never more than one version of events, that everyone got the same message. And we were actually able to make an awful lot of those changes.

Private office was more difficult to manage. I think there are very strong arguments for, as quickly as you can, recreating a whole new private office. Civil servants whether they think they're doing it or not, have an affinity to how things were done before and often have an affinity to former ministers. And had I my time over again, I would have changed more of my private office more quickly.

**NH: Your diary must have been pretty rammed with travelling and all the Defence Secretary jobs but also Parliament and so on?**

**LF:** It was, absolutely, it was. Our diary slots were 15-minute slots. The day was split into 15-minute segments because it was the only way we could do things.

**JG: Did you have any sort of tactics for balancing those competing demands on your time?**

**LF:** No, but I had a very good piece of advice before we went which was that I didn't take work home with me. In general I stayed until I finished the work. So did my private office, which was a huge discouragement to give me a lot of extra stuff in a box at the end of the day. About the only time I really did boxes as such was when I was travelling, although that was a lot of the time, even travelling to home, up and down to Somerset. So I didn't mind having full boxes for that. But generally our rule was you do the business of the day on that day, where you can. And unavoidably there are things that you have to read that you take away. But we tried to get that within the discipline of the day.

**JG: I'm just wondering if you can talk us through an occasion when an unexpected event or crisis hit the department and how you went about dealing with it.**

**LF:** Huh, how many would you like?

**JG: Anything that stands out to you that [looking back] you are quite happy with the way you dealt with the situation?**

**LF:** Well the most difficult thing to do was dealing with the loss of service personnel. Because I'd worked as a doctor with the military before I went into politics, I had a particularly strong emotional affinity with the armed forces and therefore I did take it quite personally when we lost service personnel. I remember on one occasion when it was the fiancé of a very good friend of mine [and] that was hard. That was the toughest bit of the job having to do that. But again the department learned how you liked to do things. I liked to have a picture of the person that I was writing about before I would write the letter because I think that it always made you remember it was an individual not a name. So the department were great with that. I mean they really were great. They understood that and responded really brilliantly to it. And we provided them with a lot of details and background. That was great.

The thing that hit us most out of the blue was when the Libyan situation blew up. And to be very frank, I wasn't in favour of getting involved in Libya, both the American Defence Secretary and I were worried

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