

Ministers reflect

Damian Green

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Biographical details

Electoral History

1997-present: Member of Parliament for Ashford

Parliamentary Career

2012-2014: Minister of State for Policing and Criminal Justice

2010-2012: Minister of State for Immigration

2005-2010: Shadow Minister for Home Affairs

2003-2004: Shadow Secretary of State for Transport

2001-2003: Shadow Secretary of State for Education

Damian Green was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Peter Riddell on 9th July 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project

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

DG: I thought the sort of 'welcome pack' as it were was very good; as you'd expect after an election, and it was very thorough. I had what in retrospect was the huge luxury of doing a ministerial job which I had shadowed for five years. So that had two big advantages: one, I knew what our policy was and had thought it through in some detail, and secondly, so did the officials. So the conversation more or less went 'Are you serious about this?' And we said 'Yes', and they said 'Okay fine, well here are a number of options'.

So in policy-terms, it was very smooth and in terms of day-to-day organisation if you like, just nuts and bolts of ministerial life, as long as you were sort of hard-headed about what you were prepared to do, then that was fine as well. I mean, [I] was interested just observing people who worked less hard than I did that they can work with ministers working whichever way they like, it's just some get more done than others. And there comes a point where you have to say 'This doesn't need to be in my box' or that kind of thing but I handled that, settled in fairly easily.

PR: Because you shadowed the role, but also going back a long time, you'd observed from the centre [Green worked in the No 10 Policy Unit] government working. How did that experience affect your perceptions when you came into office, of what ministers can do?

DG: Well what I observed from the Policy Unit – because in the rather underpowered Policy Unit that we had, not because of the people but because there weren't enough of us there – I had about three departments, so I observed that some departments tried to envelop the Policy Unit first and make them part of the policy-making process, and others more or less barred them at the door and wouldn't let them in. So there were very different approaches that departments had. Left to me, I would have adopted the former approach because I observed from my experience at the Policy Unit that that worked better; it tended to be that the Prime Minister gave you an easier ride at the end of the process, but that wasn't the way the Home Office decided to operate.

PR: Do you have views about what middle-ranking ministers can do based on your experience at Number 10? I mean you observed ministers operating; did you come in thinking 'Hmm, I know what as a minister of state, you could do?'

DG: I had observed long ago in the Policy Unit that it was completely variable whether ministers of state were serious figures or not, and it depends on two things. The minister of state, and also, almost more importantly, the secretary of state, and it was the case with Theresa [May, Home Secretary] that if you established trust with her, then she would let you do what she wanted you to do. And that... a lot of it is mechanics and personal chemistry and so on, but that is the important thing. One should never underestimate the importance of personal relationships in government's decisions; it makes a huge amount of difference regardless of whether you're in the coalition or not. I mean a lot has been made of how much more difficult is it governing in coalition; my observation would be not that much more difficult necessarily. Again, a lot would depend on the personal relations of individual ministers with individual other ministers and officials and so on. So that I think is the key to it.

In my circumstances it was particularly interesting because I'd been doing immigration for five years. Theresa hadn't been Shadow Home Secretary so she was getting herself up to speed on everything, and so... I mean she's a stakhanovite and works harder than anyone so got herself up to speed very, very quickly, had a good set of spads [special advisers] and so it didn't take long but it did mean I felt, you know, I was in a position where I could offer quite authoritative advice if you like, because I'd been thinking about it for five years.

NH: And you were just saying that you'd seen the way other ministers of state operated; did you have any particular roles models, people you thought that were especially effective?

DG: Not particularly, no, and precisely because obviously every department is different but every individual relationship is different. It's quite difficult to sort of model yourself on someone else at that level of government. But I did think it was important to ensure at all times that your secretary of state is onside. That the ministers of state who try and think 'Oh, I know better' and go round the back to the Treasury or Number 10 or do any of the games people play are very likely to end up in trouble, and so I never did that.

NH: And was there anything in those first few weeks and months that particularly surprised you?

DG: Not hugely because I had worked in Whitehall before, and it's normally, as I say it's the day-to-day things that surprise people who don't know how things operate in what is a slightly peculiar world.

The one thing that I suppose most strikes me was how little knowledge of and worry about Parliament there was. It was one of the messages that I spent a lot of time getting through to the extent of giving talks to civil servants that actually this is hugely important for ministers, and you know, good civil servants want to serve their ministers. This is almost the only medium in which you can lose your job in about half an hour, and a lot of officials don't get that at all.

And the other thing that quite surprised me was how many officials don't know what the ministerial job entails. I can remember giving a talk to one particular bit of my department that wasn't, as it were, big P political, I just said 'What I'll do is I'll go and take my box from the previous night' and just opened it, and they gasped and said 'What?! We send you one piece of paper every three months!' And I said 'Yeah, but that's what I have every night' – not very helpful gestures for the recording but that was me holding my hands a long way apart! 'That's my box every night, that's what it's like, so when you're preparing something for me, a) don't assume I know the details, and b) keep it crisp'. And large parts of the department didn't get that.

PR: It's very interesting, the department thing – a number of our interviewees have said that the department didn't understand Parliament. But also, in terms of your different roles – constituency, Parliament, party – how did you balance them out? How does your day work?

DG: Well one of the things you rapidly learn as a minister is that you have to be completely ruthless with your own time; that left to their own devices, the department will fill it, will fill 168 hours a week. After I'd been a minister for a few years, I had a colleague who had just been appointed minister come to me and say, 'This is terrible, they're not giving me any time to do any thinking or anything like that'. I said, 'It's your time, they work for you!' And there is this tremendous feeling that because officials are on home turf and you're a visitor, they know the rules and you need to obey them. And you need to get into the mindset and say, 'No, this is my job, this is my time'. And so the answer is, ruthlessly say, 'I will be in the department from here till then, and on Fridays I will be in my constituency' and in the Home Office there is always an emergency going on, 'So of course I'm at the end of my phone' and all of that. But you just need to know which time of the week you are doing which things, barring an extreme emergency, and your private office needs to know that, and your private office needs to be able to transmit that around the department. That way it's then up to you what balance you choose to seek between constituency, ministerial work, party work. You have to go up the country and do that, and very occasionally having a personal life as well! So you basically have to know how you're going to map out every hour of your week.

PR: How much time did you spend in the House?

DG: Um, in the Chamber or in the House?

PR: Well both, but fair distinction!

DG: In the Chamber not very much, I mean less than ever before or since... never when I wasn't speaking or having to adorn the frontbench. Except for Prime Minister's Questions, [that was] the only time of the week I just tipped up as a normal MP just to watch the show. In the House, most sort of afternoon/ early evenings, you know, the way the House is running now, many days of the week you would have votes at 7pm, so that was an obvious cut off point, and even on Mondays I would basically work sort of 9-5 at the department and then come over here and do work here till 10 at night. I say here, we are having this interview in the House of Commons. So I would spend most mornings and part of most afternoons in the department and the rest of the time in the House.

NH: You mentioned the Home Office having lots of crises. Thinking about decision-making, if you could just talk us through an example of a crisis or an unexpected event that hit the department, and how you went about dealing with it as a minister?

DG: I genuinely can't give you 'an' instance because, you know, how many to choose from! What were some of our worst instances..? Queues at Heathrow in the run up to the Olympics was probably the most serious where... and it's just a constant series of meetings, visits to Heathrow, negotiations with authorities at Heathrow, and working out – that was an interesting example because there was no high politics involved at all; what we had to do and what proved extremely difficult was to get competent people running the minute-by-minute operations on the ground. And it shows how what feels like 'Surely that's just a bit of admin', in the end it got down to ministerial [effort] – the Prime Minister was getting involved as well, all the way up the line.

And actually, what mattered was ... it's almost something as simple as, what they had done was, when the queue started building up... and the rule of any airport is that once a queue is built up, you take hours to get it back, so you just have to stop them building again first. What they used to do was send a tannoy message into the back room where they were all having coffee, saying 'Please will someone come out, we need to fill up a few more benches', and everyone just ignored it. If the manager went in and said 'You, you and you, go sit on benches 10 to 15', then you've solved it – it was as simple as that. This should not have to entail ministerial intervention, but you discover it's actually that kind of thing of sending a senior official who comes up and says 'This is what you need to do' and you say 'Right, this is now what we're going to do', whatever unions say or things like that. And as a result of that plus other things where you would expect ministerial intervention, like decisions that we would pour more resources at it and there would be a lot of people sitting at the border and we would train people so they could act as border officials, then that bit of the Olympics passed entirely unnoticed, it was one of the triumphs.

We could welcome people at Heathrow and they all had a good time from the moment they got in this country, it was quite a significant. If it had gone wrong it would have been a significant national disaster, so it was that important. So that was a long-running emergency, but you know, there were forever short-term emergencies.

PR: What did that tell you about how the machine operated? What conclusions did you draw about the way government operated?

DG: My overriding conclusion is that the sort of image of the British Civil Service as being 'a Rolls-Royce' in the old cliché does apply in terms of policy, and the people who are at the top-end or going up to the top-end giving policy advice. Absolutely, they are world-class. [In terms of] running things, the British government is quite poor; large organisations that do repetitive things all the time and therefore employ people at relatively low wages, who are doing important things and who are not managed very effectively – I've never worked at DWP [Department for Work and Pensions] but I suspect that's part of the problem with the benefits system, it was certainly the problem with the immigration system. It's a huge transactional organisation the UKBA [UK Border Agency], as it was, until we broke it up, was about the size of Sainsburys in terms of the number of transactions it has to transact. And you ask them to do an impossible job because what you're saying is 'We want you to provide customer service in a

friendly way to about 99.5% of your customers, and we want you just to say “no” and if necessary arrest the other 0.5% of your customers’. And you’ve got to know, often as they walk towards somebody at a gate, at an airport, whether they’re one or the other, and we’ll try and provide systems to support that.

So it’s a really difficult job, but the mechanics of getting it done prove incredibly difficult and I’ve written this before somewhere, that this was summed up in a tremendous aperçu by a high-flying civil servant in my private office who is going on to great things, he just looked at me and said, ‘Nobody ever got to be a permanent secretary by being able to run a benefits office efficiently.’ That may be true, and even if it’s not true it’s certainly the attitude.

So the best people avoid those sorts of jobs and that’s why those are the sorts of things that the British government machine falls down on. Yes, I had members of my private office who were clearly high flyers who were sent off to run benefits offices, but they do it for the minimum amount of time and you know, they regard it as quite fun, but nobody ever thought ‘This is what I want to do, I want to run HMRC or...’

PR: What about the quality of civil servants who worked for you? You said at the top, really good, shrewd policy advisers on the way up and so on. What was the quality, given that it was a time of big cutbacks when you were a minister?

DG: Well the quality was... I mean, in a way I thought, surprisingly high. I would visit immigration offices where people were taking life and death decisions for people being paid less than £20,000 a year and doing it conscientiously, and as far as one could see, most of the time quite well. If you like the old ethos prevails more than I might have thought, particularly in heavily unionised areas, but it’s like any organisation. It’s a very big organisation and there are good and bad people and there are.

The other thing to remember of course when you’re asking ministers is there are huge chunks of these organisations that ministers never penetrate, and they would be shocked there to ever seen a minister wandering around. I mean I did try and do a bit of management just by walking around, just asking ‘Well, what are you doing?’, finding out, ‘Oh, I see, that goes on here,’ and they’re always quite shocked to see ministers. So therefore quality of large parts of it, I don’t know, you know, by definition I only got to see what I was shown.

PR: What about the relations with the rest of Whitehall; Number 10 which you’d seen from the other side, a long time before, the Treasury and so on. I mean the Home Office is always seen as a department apart, it’s seen as unintegrated with the rest of Whitehall?

DG: Yes, and it has an image of itself that’s different and rather prides itself on that. I mean the other thing about the Home Office that I would observe is having always been regarded as a complete graveyard, actually the calibre of people there is very good, and as an institution, for obvious reasons, it’s very good at coping with crises. You know, I can compare it with the MoJ [Ministry of Justice] because I was a minister in both at the same time and to compare and contrast was quite interesting, because the Home Office, its biggest thing is the police and the security services. They are used to coping with crises.

The MoJ works at the speed of the judiciary; it is very slow and laborious, and took an age to get everything done and much less of a self-image, partly because it’s a new department. The Home Office is a department for saying ‘no’ essentially; it’s what any interior ministry is, you know: ‘We want to stop you committing crime, we want to stop you from coming in if you’re an illegal immigrant, you know, we want to stop you from behaving in a disorderly fashion on a Saturday night’, that sort of [thing] and so ministers get like that. You would go to Cabinet committees, and for example deregulation - huge thing, everyone’s in favour of deregulation - unless you’re the Home Office and you say ‘Fine if you deregulate something else, but that means more people will get drunk so there’ll be more crime’ and you’ll realise that whatever you want to liberalise the Home Office will always have an argument for why it’s a bad idea, because somebody will exploit it to commit a crime or do something anti-social. I think it’s inherent in the system; interior ministries will always be slightly antipathetic to other parts of the government machine.

PR: Treasury?

DG: Treasury... um... I didn't personally and nor did the department have any particular problems with the Treasury. There were tough spending rounds and all of that, but I mean thanks to George Osborne [the Chancellor]; George Osborne made it very clear at the start of the Government that he stood behind the idea of an immigration target, so all those Treasury officials who were treating it in purely economic terms, basically couldn't. So the Treasury never argued against it in a way that one could imagine in other circumstances they would. But anyway; the Chancellor made clear – and shrewdly realised that he had to make it clear that he as Chancellor stood behind this policy and so the Treasury was never a problem with that.

NH: What do you feel was your greatest achievement in office?

DG: The greatest achievement was the fact that for all the stresses and strains, the immigration system worked better, particularly the asylum system – even under the current strain it is now, which is worse than it was when I was immigration minister – works a lot better. There are a lot of people whose lives were made less miserable and enforcement is a bit better. My greatest personal pleasure was abolishing ID cards. Just on a personal level, it was the only time in about 13 years of opposition I had straight-forwardly rebelled against the three-line-whip to vote in favour of ID cards; I refused to do that, I voted against and then I was the minister that took through the Act abolishing them. So that I felt was quite a neat, tick-in-a-box, circularity.

As Policing Minister, again despite the sort of bad turnout for the Police and Crime Commissioners [newly-elected roles], actually getting them up and running, and we will now have them for a second term and some of them are already making a difference, that actually made quite a significant difference. And the other thing, the thing I most wished, 'Gosh I would have liked to carry on doing this' was trying to make police technology much more modern, because I think that would be completely transformational. The police is one of the institutions that's been very slow to adopt basic smartphone technology. I had police officers telling me 'It's ridiculous, I can use my phone to do everything I want to, but then I get to work, and I'm doing this important job, I'm given a really old-fashioned piece of technology which doesn't help me... frankly, I could devise an app' and they do. Police officers are devising apps for their own phones to enable them to access all the information! Police officers processing information; tell him or her, 'Number 48, we've just heard something has happened there', and immediately you can go there and say 'Are you X' and you know who X is – all of that kind of thing is absolutely transformational for policing that and body-worn video and all of that.

PR: In order to achieve those successes, what was crucial to mobilise? What were the key levers?

DG: The key thing we did was set up a 'Challenge Fund', because at a time of budgetary restraint, they were all keen to get any extra amount of money. So straightforwardly we top-sliced the budget and said 'Here is' - I can't remember what was it, £60 million I think in the first year, it got bigger afterwards – 'Here's some money that you can bid for, if you've got a project that will bring you into the 21st century technologically.' At which point all the energy of 43 police forces came in saying 'Okay, good...' and the PCCs, it was something new and shiny that the PCCs could do. So actually, instead of pushing to do something, they were demanding that you help them do something, and you know that is proceeding at pace and it's all happening now, you know. You have a number of levers but the most effective is money. So if you can persuade them to want to spend the money the way you want them to spend it, then you're quite a long way there.

PR: What about the policy processes within government to get you to a place for certain decisions? The ID card abolition was a pledge so that was pretty straightforward; but on other things, what are your reflections on the policy process in government?

DG: I thought the policy process was fine. You know in the end, all the departments have to agree and that kind of thing, and you could use whatever combination of black arts and making sure your mates were on-side and ensuring the Treasury was lined up first and all those sorts of things sensible ministers do. And again I found the existence of the Coalition itself made no difference because it was just one more clearance mechanism. You know that process of where you propose and then you have to jump these various hurdles; it was just an extra hurdle so the machinery could cope very well. In terms of individual policies it meant that Nick Clegg had to agree to something which was occasionally difficult. But the actual process I thought was fine.

NH: You talked before about the importance of the relationship with the Secretary of State; could you talk a bit about how you managed the relationship with Theresa [May] and indeed with her special advisers?

DG: Very well I think. Theresa is hard-working, a bit of a control freak... none of which could be regarded as a criticism. So you knew that it was not clever to try and go behind her back or just go against her. You could obviously discuss things with her, and discuss things with the special advisers who were powerful, knowledgeable, experienced. You know, they weren't just people dragged in at the age of 22. Nick Timothy and Fiona Cunningham [May's spads at the time] were both old friends of mine as it happened, and making sure they were on-side and their political input was on-side first was very important.

The capacity to turn things round quickly was important because one of the battles with the machine - which again, it's only a battle you have to fight once - is saying, 'It's not good enough for officials to spend three months thinking about something, giving it to me on a Wednesday saying 'This has got to go in the Home Secretary's weekend box tomorrow, so you've got to decide tonight.' They tried that on me once and I said, 'No, that's not happening again. I need time to think about this as well.'

So again, it's just knowledge of the process to know that if you want time to think about it before it goes to the Home Secretary and indeed if you think you and the Home Secretary are going to be in a different place then you need to have a meeting with the Home Secretary and talk about it. That kind of basic time management and ability to think is hugely important in terms of developing policy but also in terms of maintaining good relationships so you're not suddenly faced with a point where the Home Secretary is taking a decision in your field which you know nothing about which is the worst thing that can happen to a junior minister because at that point the department will just react automatically saying 'Okay, fine' but we will just ignore you altogether. You've got to be part of the process, and making sure that you are part of the process in ways that as I say are sort of mechanical.

NH: So through meetings and...?

DG: Yeah, well just knowing you've got time, that it's not the case... I mean, in the Home Office you'd frequently get things saying, 'This has gone up to you and the Home Secretary simultaneously because this person has got to be put on a plane, or not, tomorrow morning' and it's now nine o'clock at night, so we haven't got time to go through the consultation process. But in most departments that wouldn't be the case.

PR: That's quite an interesting point, which is how conscious were you of the judges and the courts?

DG: Oh, constantly. I mean not so much as the police minister, or indeed the criminal justice minister when I've spent my life thinking about how the courts could be...

PR: No, I'm thinking of immigration...

DG: Yeah, immigration. There must have been more JRs [Judicial Reviews] against me than anyone else in the country during the period I was doing that. So all the time, and a lot of the life of an immigration minister is trying to devise the laws, SIs [Statutory Instruments] and so on, and stop the

will of the government being frustrated by judges trying to make legislation, and not just primary legislation but secondary legislation, watertight so it can't be over-interpreted by judges. Sometimes you succeed, sometimes you don't. So a lot is the answer.

PR: What did you find most frustrating about being minister?

DG: Not getting your own way all the time! And you know, that I'm sure applies all the way up to Prime Ministers who get frustrated that they say things that should happen that don't; and also in some areas how long it takes, and I suspect that depends on what background you come from. But the amount of time it took from even everyone agreeing with a decision to actually seeing anything change on the ground is a number of years. And inherent in the ways of politics are that you're very unlikely to see your successes through, and therefore I think that's a good thing that we've had both the Chancellor and the Home Secretary who are now in their sixth year, so not only can they be judged on their record but from their personal point of view they can say 'Oh good, we did that and that's now happening' or 'Gosh we did that and I wish we hadn't!'

PR: One interesting issue, particularly of the Home Office is how important were media pressures on you? How much was there a sense of 'we've got to react because of the media'? Or indeed there's an immediate crisis and people say 'We need a response?'

DG: I mean it's just like swimming in the sea; yes of course almost everything that happens in the Home Office requires a permanent response and you just have to be tough-minded about when you don't comment essentially, and that's easier as a minister than in opposition. [I had] done years and years in opposition, where unless you're saying anything you were invisible. Whereas as a minister you can not say something and still be doing important things. So you have to be tough-minded enough to know when you're not just going to react to the next tabloid headline, or anticipate it and try and shape it – occasionally you do things deliberately thinking 'They'll like this'. It's one of the things I admire the Home Secretary for, that she is not driven by a media agenda. That is not a universal truth amongst senior politicians.

PR: One thing that you mentioned – that you were a joint minister [split between the Home Office and Ministry of Justice]. How did that work out, because we now see more of them, particularly in the second half of the Coalition?

DG: Yes, it's a much more difficult job, for all sorts of obvious reasons. You have two bosses. You have two sets of demands on your time, and all the things that ministers have to do that go beneath the radar – visits and speaking at slightly dull conferences and so on. There's just twice as much of that. But most of all you are trying to work to two bosses who may well have two different agendas, and indeed there is an inherent tension between the Home Secretary and the Justice Secretary whoever it is. So it makes it more difficult. But in a sense it makes it more satisfying because you can compare and contrast. And I tried to do that job by making a reality of the fact that you are minister for policing and criminal justice, and one of the things I was seeking to do and one of the frustrations of not being able to do it anymore, was actually trying to make the whole process from, if you like, arrest to sentence and beyond [to] rehabilitation or whatever, one process. There are various reports showing that one of the problems with the whole system is the number of blockages there are where police aren't talking to courts and files go missing and people have different kind of technologies that don't talk to each other... all these things, again, it sounds like organisational, banal things but actually one of the things you can do as a minister is transform the system if you can get all that sort of basic stuff right. And that's what I was seeking to do, to make a reality of the job, and I hope my successors continue with that. So there are insights and satisfactions available from going across two different departments but basically it's more difficult. I would not recommend it.

PR: Should it have become joint Civil Service units? I mean, should you have had a joint private office?

DG: Well I did have a joint private office but I physically moved them. I mean some came from the Home Office, some came from MoJ, but every so often the entire private office [would move]. I mean, not hugely often, but we made the point that that's what I was doing. But on the whole, I am not convinced by joint ministers in two departments at once. I didn't discuss particularly with other colleagues.

NH: Along with having two bosses, you would have also had two sets of junior ministerial colleagues and two teams. Did you do much with other ministers?

DG: Yes, to some extent in that you always have to, but that's fine, that's not a problem. I mean some of the problem was you would occasionally get flatly contradictory advice; the two departments would just be advising people in two different ways or there were moments, surreal moments, in August particularly when you're duty minister. There was one point where I was required to write to myself as one minister in a department to another, demanding that something happen, which I was tempted to do just to see how the system would cope with this!

PR: Yes; how long would you take?!

DG: ...and then refuse my request, as well!

PR: Just one final thing, how would you define an effective minister?

DG: An effective minister has a clear idea of what they want to achieve over a realistic timescale which can be one year or two years; much more than that you're [gone]. Maybe as a secretary of state you can [have more time]. Know what you want to do, transmit that as soon as you can after you arrive – I appreciate that if you are going into a new job you might not be able to do that – and then worry away at it so at the end you can say 'We did that'. And be realistic in what you can achieve.

PR: How could government be made more effective? To produce more effective ministers like you're describing?

DG: Well, I don't think it's the job of government to produce effective ministers, it's the duty of effective ministers to produce good government, it seems to me!

PR: What are the main things that encourage effectiveness let me put it that way round, to incentivise it?

DG: Well, you could incentivise it by having proper appraisal systems. We all know that ministers are hired and fired for a number of reasons, and we sort of all accept that as 'That's the way things are'. Well they needn't be. The real revolution for politicians if you like would be to say 'We're now going to treat you like a sort of manager in a company, and we're to have development programmes and you're going to have training and you're going to be assessed regularly and in an objective way and your future progress will depend on that.' And you get to that stage and everyone says 'Oh, it's impossible because in the end, Prime Ministers will want more women or more northerners or they'll just dislike people and want to get rid of them.' Well, a strong-minded Prime Minister will say, 'No, actually what I want is to run an effective government, and I'm going to do it that way.'

So that will be one way to incentivise the ministers, and the other thing is all about knowledge, that all politicians should know how Whitehall works and Whitehall should know how Parliament works and why Parliament is important. And both sides of that equation seem to be me to be surprisingly deficient.

NH: Are there any tips that you would give to a minister entering government for the first time?

DG: Be absolutely clear how you are going to run your life, and make sure that you get what you want and what you can in that regard, because if you don't, you will be permanently miserable. And if you start off doing things the wrong way, it's much more difficult to change afterwards.

And again just be realistic; all eager people in new jobs say, 'Yes I'll do this, yes I'll take on that, yes I'll do that', and when it's three in the morning and you're still doing your box, you might think, 'I can't carry on doing this.'

My favourite story – I've never wanted to check whether this is true or not, I've never had this conversation with Ken – it's with Ken Clarke who it is alleged, when he was made Home Secretary, on the Thursday of his first week, they presented him with seven boxes, and Ken is supposed to have called his driver up and said, 'Pick any two of those!' As I say, I've never checked that story with Ken because I don't want to know if it's not true!

PR: Yes, it's such a good story, and it's so believable!

DG: Yes, it is believable and if he did do that it's exactly right. Let them know from Day One; this is what I'm prepared to do so you have to do your job and select what work I have to do, what comes to you. I suppose, giving advice to others; if you find you're spending a lot of your time doing things that you think are a waste of time then don't do them. And don't let officials tell you, 'Oh you have to do this Minister'. No you don't! You're the minister.

NH: And with the benefit of hindsight, would you have approached the role differently or done things differently?

DG: Oh, hundreds of things. A lot of it is to try and maintain a sort of strategic flexibility. In retrospect it's clear that the UK Border Agency was too big. An organisation of 27,000 people was just unmanageable and it's now in 3 parts and it's much better. But we sort of got to that by iteration. I wish I would have been able to say at some stage, 'Look, let's start again. How would we organise the immigration system in terms of getting people in who know about organising organisations, somebody who knows about running organisations and the optimal size and purpose of an organisation, rather than one big all-purpose organisation. And that does boil back to the permanent complaint of not having enough time just to do long-term thinking. It's particularly busy in a ministerial job so you never, ever [get that].

Some of my colleagues I know tried to put their time in their diary, 'Between the hours of 11-1 three days a week, just leave it blank so I can sit here and think', and if that's the way you think, fine. I mean that wasn't for me, because I think by discussing things with people I would say, 'Right, let's have a meeting' – and I did – 'where we think long-term'. Nothing gets in except the most extreme crisis. I wish I'd done more of that.

NH: Did you get much of that sort of thinking from the outside world, from experts or people outside of the Civil Service?

DG: No, oddly enough, because... it's not the sort of thing that policy think-tanks or pressure groups or anything like that think about. It's an interesting thought that people don't – apart from the IfG [Institute for Government] oddly enough – they don't say 'Why don't you organise yourself differently', they say 'Why don't you change this policy?'

PR: Absolutely.

DG: There is nobody out there who thinks, if you just want the benefits paid efficiently, if you just want immigration things processed efficiently. Why would anyone think that? That's dull. It's absolutely vital and in fact in the long run, for the reputation of both any individual government and government more

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generally, it's the most important thing.

People will put up with things they disagree with, if they think you're competent, and to refer to my point about the policy, advice is very good, the implementation is often pretty ropey. Actually, people care at least as much if not more about the implementation; competence is the sort of bedrock of anything else, and that's what we spend not enough of our time thinking about.

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