

# Ministers reflect

David Willetts

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## Biographical details

## Electoral History

1992-2015: Member of Parliament for Havant

## Parliamentary Career

2010-2014: Minister of State for Universities and Science

2007-2010: Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills

2005-2007, 1998-1999: Shadow Secretary of State for Education

2005 (May-Dec): Shadow Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

1999-2005: Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

1996: Paymaster General

1995-1996: Parliamentary Secretary (Duchy of Lancaster Office)

*David Willetts was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Hannah White on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project*

**Nicola Hughes (NH):** Okay. So if we can start off by talking about when you first started as a minister – and I know you actually had two periods, in the nineties and in 2010, so you might want to compare the two – but what was your experience of coming into government like?

**David Willetts (DW):** Well, yes, the two experiences were different. My coming in government under John Major was at the end of that government and it was a mid-term reshuffle after we'd been elected in 1992. So it was less dramatic than arriving at the start of a new Parliament with a change of government.

Arriving in BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills] with Vince [Cable, then Business Secretary] on that [first] morning, we had David Cameron turn up. As Vince has said, one of David Cameron's first visits as a minister was to BIS, and in fact his only visit to BIS was on the first day. And for me then, we had a lot of confusion about the scope of BIS as a department because Peter Mandelson had grown a lot of it. Things like would universities go back to DfE [Department for Education] and all that? And my advice in opposition in the Shadow Cabinet had been, we should have a big BIS and not dismantle it. And David [Cameron] turning up on the first day was partly a signal that he would not break up BIS which I thought was a big decision. Because BIS is a peculiar department. The classic small BIS is policy-rich but with virtually no budget and no real levers to engage with the real world. And I thought the Mandelson construction with universities and science in it made a lot of sense. And of course that was my responsibility.

Then we had early on to find out the working relationship with Vince because I was in Cabinet as well. He was the Secretary of State. The PM very much implied that universities and science was my Cabinet-level responsibility not least because we expected the Lib Dems to activate the terms of the Coalition Agreement from day one and not participate in some very difficult decisions on university financing.

**NH:** So you knew a bit about how government works obviously from your previous experience in the mid-nineties, did anything surprise you coming back in 2010? Had the workings changed much?

**DW:** Yes and before that I had been a civil servant and I'd been a Private Secretary to a minister and indeed succeeded as a Private Secretary in the Treasury by Martin Donnelly, who then became the Permanent Secretary in BIS. So the processes, had it changed much? I would say that in general kind of FOI [Freedom of Information Act] processes, regulatory stuff was a lot harder, much more intrusive. And I'd already worked out for example – colleagues were always falling into this trap – that an early email about minister's preferences [such as] he likes his coffee with two sugars or he hates split infinitives, is FOI-able and will appear in the papers and they'll take the piss out of you. So it's a case study actually in the FOI. So I knew I had no means of communicating in writing with officials about things like that, anything like that had to be said. And it was quite inefficient. So right from the beginning you're very aware of the constraints now imposed by FOI.

**NH:** I mean it sounds like you're pretty well versed in what you wanted to do, but did you have any support going into these roles?

**DW:** Well, I had a long-standing special adviser, Nick Hillman, who had been with me for years in opposition, who I wanted to have with me and that was all agreed. In general my approach was that as a former civil servant, the machine was not the enemy. And something that Vince and I prided ourselves on was we didn't get into a state of conflict with Whitehall.

I think the machine found it hard to handle coalition, especially at first. We were unusual; we and the Treasury were the only two departments which had two ministers in Cabinet from two political parties. So there was a legitimate line of communication from me to the Chancellor and the PM in extremis. Part of the job at the beginning was to keep the Coalition on the road. And I did have and still have enormous

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respect for Vince. I think we made it work. But we were very aware this was a place where the Coalition was going to be tested. And I think BIS was slightly slow to work out the dynamics of the Coalition. Although I was doing universities and science, they didn't realise that the PM's Office or the Chancellor would expect me to have a Conservative angle on everything that BIS was doing and that part of my job was to keep the Conservative side of the Coalition aware of what we were doing and why. And there was still bits of BIS that were quite slow to copy me in on things, but that was just I think because it was a different way of working in the Coalition. They weren't really used to that.

### **NH: What were your big priorities, things that you wanted to achieve?**

**DW:** Well by the time I'd finally got to Cabinet I had become and remain by and large a sceptic about reorganising things. And I think it's normally displacement activity – where there is a policy trade off you don't like, you think somehow reorganising it will solve the trade off and it rarely does. So [I'm] a sceptic about reorganising things.

On universities it was very simple. The terms of reference for the Browne Committee [on Higher Education funding] Peter Mandelson had consulted me on as the Shadow Secretary of State. So getting the universities issue, the tricky HE [higher education] financing resolved early on was a very high priority. And then the other priority was the CSR [Comprehensive Spending Review] and public spending and how we handled some very difficult public spending negotiations on a very tight timetable.

### **NH: And how much had shadowing the role helped you when then entered office?**

**DW:** A lot and right from the beginning. I had been had shadowing HE [higher education] when it had been in with Education and then when it had gone to DIUS [Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills] and then when it had gone to BIS. And I remember very early on at meetings with senior officials and Vince, making points about HE that they were clearly completely unfamiliar with.

So BIS did have a problem. It had a small set of middle-ranking officials who had travelled with the HE brief who did know stuff about it, but at the senior levels there was minimal understanding and a bit of a sense that this strange spacecraft had landed on their territory and they didn't quite understand it.

### **NH: And did you feel free to challenge back?**

**DW:** I found them surprising. Again, these are very smart people, they just hadn't done HE. We just had to explain HE policy to them. I knew more about HE policy than most of the senior officials at BIS did. And Peter Mandelson had been very good, he had negotiated with me. Of course, I cleared the terms of reference [of the] Browne [Review] with George [Osborne] and David [Cameron]. And I kept in touch with [Lord] Browne so I knew where things were going. And I had sent out a letter to all Tory candidates advising them not to sign the NUS [National Union of Students] pledge [against tuition fee rises]. But what surprised me, although it was massively helpful for us, I thought on about day two, Vince and the Lib Dems would say, HE financing is incredibly difficult for us, we've all signed this pledge, so over to you and I am staying out of the HE financing issue in accordance with the terms of the Coalition Agreement. Now in many ways, as I say it was massively helpful that they didn't. But that was the first surprise.

And I guess it was partly that the Lib Dems may have imagined there was an ingenious solution that would see them through their pledge when there wasn't or it was a sufficiently substantial part of what the department did that Vince, as the Secretary of State, was not going to give up on it completely, or thirdly, someone thought it's going to be very odd if I'm standing in the House of Commons taking some business through and the Secretary of State is sitting beside me, sitting on his hands and not voting for it. It would have been a very, very tricky experience. And as I say, thank heavens for me and the Conservatives that it didn't happen. But it was actually deeply damaging for the Lib Dems and I still don't quite understand why they didn't just activate the Coalition Agreement on day two.

**NH: So based on your experiences, how would you describe the main roles and duties of being a minister?**

**DW:** Well, neither universities nor science are bad things where Britain is notoriously weak. So fundamentally your job is to be the servant of a community, which has got lots of prior expertise greater than yours, is going to be around long after you've gone, but you can push it in certain directions to do that. They've got to trust that you're fundamentally on their side. And you are more likely to get change if it comes from an honest friend rather than they think someone is parachuted in to get headlines for two years by beating up on them and then moving on. So you need to communicate from early on that you're a servant of the community. So for HE the problem was that we were going to have some very tough things on fees.

For science it was a bit different. I'm not a scientist and I'd not shadowed it for so long – I'd had off and on responsibility for it. I hadn't stuck with it for as long as I had with HE. So [I needed to] gain the confidence of the community when I was not a scientist and that related to the very tricky issue of the CSR [Comprehensive Spending Review] and how we handled the CSR.

**NH: And if we think about it in day-to-day terms, how did you actually spend most of your time as a minister?**

**DW:** I tried to be quite accessible. If you look through the register of external meetings that ministers now have to publish every few months, you will find a very large amount of meetings with outsiders. And not to be dependent on officials... Although there were some people in BIS who understood the policy, not to have a kind of model where the monopoly access to you is via the ministerial machine. So a lot of the time is trying to find the people on the outside who either have got wisdom to impart to you or whose voice in shaping the perceptions of the community is important that you need to have them onside, but ideally both. So quite a lot of external communication and managing the lie of the land with other partner bodies, notably Number 10 and the Treasury.

**NH: And what about you keeping up with your time as an MP, on the more political side of stuff, did you get to spend much time in the House of Commons or doing your constituency work?**

**DW:** The implicit contract is that 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.

**NH: And do you have any top tips on managing time? It sounds like you did it quite effectively?**

**DW:** What I did do was I kept notes of all the main meetings. I'm afraid it's incredibly low tech, but literally in a manuscript notebook. And over the period of years that is incredibly useful. Again it's not threatening but just occasionally when officials come in with something and say, 'Didn't we discuss this last spring and I thought we'd decided what to do?' And I could go to them – and I kept [the notebooks] in a row on my shelves behind me – and normally be able to find it and say, 'Yeah, when we had this discussion last, didn't we say we would do that?' And just for them to know that you were doing it.

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Whereas I have to say, one of the things is the arrival of email and the inadequacies of the departmental IT system in which I rapidly lost confidence. I would say the official memory, which has always been a problem in Whitehall, is even worse now because people move around so the expertise doesn't build up. And the written record, the physical written records are non-existent and the IT email system, all of it gets wiped off [eventually]. So there was very little historical memory – shockingly little. And towards the end you would actually have people come to you.

I had to negotiate very early on, I like having lots of books and papers around me. So I wanted to bring my books, my universities and science policy books and everything. And people would come to me and ask can they borrow something because I would keep the historic white papers, the main documents. So if people wanted to consult an old policy document, the only place in the department you were likely to be able to find it was in my office.

**NH: A mini-library.**

**DW: A mini-library, yeah.**

**Hannah White (HW): Can you talk us through an occasion when an unexpected event or a crisis hit the department and how you dealt with it?**

**DW:** I think the story of the CSR [Comprehensive Spending Review] is worth telling. Vince, and I quite understand this, as a secretary of state was not going to have favourite children. And basically, the BIS budget was in three significant elements: vocational training, university and HE, and science. And in the CSR negotiations the kind of options we were looking at in HE post the Browne Report delivered the HE savings and more – massive controversy and costs for the Lib Dems but did it with that. There were reductions in FE [further education] and vocational stuff, which I think was actually quite painful for Vince because he had a personal link to it. I think his mother had been helped by doing an adult course in an FE college.

There were also cash reductions in the science budget agreed between BIS and the Treasury. And this was in the late June. And I thought that I would not be able... well personally I thought it was a bad thing and I would not be able to function effectively as a science minister if the first thing I do is come in with cash cuts. But I would have looked like a shop steward with him [Vince Cable] in the magisterial role. So I was an advocate of the HE stuff, which we had to do. And I also wanted science protected.

BIS thought they had got the best deal they could with the Treasury. And I didn't fully understand how this worked at the time, but it worked very neatly. There came a point when Vince thought he'd got the [best] deal possible, which involved cuts to science. And this is where they didn't understand the dynamics of the Coalition. At that point, I went to the key opinion people, the key decision makers that I knew, people like Ed Llewellyn [the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff] or the Chancellor, and said, 'If you cut science it will be absolutely bloody awful. It will be bad for science, it's bad for Britain, it will start us off on the wrong foot, don't do this'. And I remember the Treasury saying... the best I got out of the Treasury was 'If we have any room in the roundings, on the last weekend of the public expenditure round, if there's any room for manoeuvre, we'll look after science'. That's how far I got it. And these are invented figures, but you know, if the target is public expenditure of £600 billion and our figures add up to £599.1 [billion], we'll know there is a tiny little room for manoeuvre, we'll look after science. And I got them on the last weekend. Vince didn't know I was having these conversations but this was a Conservative conversation. And I can still remember the phone call on the Sunday evening after George [Osborne] had had his team together all day at his residence. He said, 'Yeah, it's going to be alright and you're going to get cash protection'.

And I remember going into BIS the following day, and saying and feeding back to officials, I'd done this on the political network. And they said, 'No, no, you don't understand. We've agreed this 10% cut' or '15% cut'. I said, 'No, I think we should look at a model of flat cash'. And then getting an email from the Treasury with the terms of an agreement which included, for example, the assessment of impact of research, which is a controversial issue in universities. And I myself in opposition had been complaining about these impact studies. But one of the first Treasury conditions was that the impact assessment goes

ahead.

And I remember that Monday, the officials slowly cottoning on that what was going to be finally announced on Wednesday and Thursday was different than the departmental settlement. And they were always in two minds about this. Their fear was always that anything that I did bilaterally with George [Osborne] on science or technology was somehow going to be at the expense of the rest of the department. And I never went to George, and I had a very good working relationship, and said look after science and take it off the FE budget or anything. That would have been a betrayal. But my view was that always, if they had felt they'd got the best they could, and I then asked for extra for science and technology, then they couldn't complain. We were all net better off.

That achievement, the ring-fenced cash protected science budget, left behind a department never quite knowing whether to deploy this link to Treasury as an asset or to be endlessly suspicious that it was going to be used in some way to do down the rest of the department which was never my intention.

**HW: So in terms of your working style as a minister more generally, how would you describe it? How did you go about making the decisions as a minister which fell to you?**

**DW:** Well you want to hear people's views and you want to have an environment where, which I always appreciated as an official when I was in the Treasury, which was that different views are put in front of you. You want to have the debate in front of you. There's always the dilemma as to the right size of meeting and you can have excessively large meetings with everybody which are clunky. On the other hand you don't want people to think that the real decision is taken when you're just in a corner with your special adviser and one other person. So I always wanted kind of medium-sized meetings with a dozen people around the room where proper views were expressed.

I think BIS saw HE as essentially just a public expenditure issue. I think they were incredibly slow to see HE as an important part of [the] economy, that contributes to productivity, where's there an interesting education agenda. And because Michael Gove was giving this running commentary from the side lines, because he always wanted universities to go back to DfE, BIS never quite got to embrace it because BIS never knew whether in six months' time Michael was finally going to persuade the PM to take it off us.

Policy in a department is very peculiar. It's a bit like taking over a ramshackle Victorian country house, where there are somethings that look like great big levers that if you pull them the butler will come and absolutely nothing happens. And then there were these obscure dusty valves in the corner of the room that nobody has touched for years but actually prove to have quite a lot of power. So what makes things work and what doesn't make them work? And the bits of the system that matter are not always clearly signalled. You sometimes think even officials don't always fully understand. And they put a lot of effort into things that maybe have some modest publicity value but aren't really going to change anything, when other things really could change things.

**HW: Can you give me examples of that?**

**DW:** I can't think of one off hand. As we keep talking there may be something that comes to me.

**HW: What do you feel was your greatest achievement in office. You've mentioned the ring-fencing of the science budget. Would that be it or is there anything else apart from that?**

**DW:** One view, without being proud, you could say one part of the job is just financing. Universities and science are great British successes and the challenge is to keep them properly funded, decently funded, and in two different ways: in HE by a shift from grants to loans and in science by the cash protection of the budget. On both occasions we ended up with maintaining and, actually, in both occasions, eventually increasing the cash going into them. So, not being proud, there is a kind of relationship management with the Treasury so you do not find yourself facing crippling cuts. And despite the controversy on HE, actually the agenda in HE... there's more money for teaching at universities now than there was in 2010. So there was that.

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I would say intellectually the thing which I am most proud of, but I'm not sure it will survive, is rethinking the Conservative approach to business. I gave a series of speeches which we thought would be more controversial than they were, about there being a legitimate role for government for helping technologies on the road to market, much closer to market than we've historically done. The brief problem is we stop public funding too soon and then beat up ourselves for being risk averse when we were really expecting the commercial sector to take risks they wouldn't be expected to take even in the US. And that's the case for Catapult Centres. That's the case for an industrial strategy that backs technology and all that. [It] probably has suffered in the end from being seen as Vince, by my party, when it was actually a shared thought process. I had been a Thatcherite who was very sceptical about industrial strategy. He had written an Orange Book essay about how the DTI [Department of Trade and Industry] should be abolished. Both of us, playing off each other I think to some extent, in the good sense of the word, came to realise there were legitimate, constructive things that government could do.

For me, an early meeting that brought this home to me, and partly for that reason it was something that had a big influence on my thinking, was the space sector. Where again something else I'm proud of is shifting UK space policy. Paul Drayson, the outgoing Science and Technology Minister, had left behind a space growth plan that had been written with the space sector and a structure called a Space Leadership Council which brought together politicians, ministers, the research science community and the commercial community. His plan involved big increases in public spending. We said he evidently did not think that Labour was going to win the election but he had produced this plan.

Very early on in the first few weeks I found myself invited to go along to the first meeting of the Space Leadership Council and took a deliberate decision that I'd inherited this mechanism. Drayson had carefully created it in the final year of the last Labour Government in a rather absurd move, because they all thought they were going to lose. And again going back to not reorganising, I was given all the options: do you want to pause this? Do you want to review it? Do you want to go down this route? I took a deliberate decision to give this a go, partly influenced by a guy called Andy Green who was the business leader who co-chaired the council and who came to see me.

So you gained a year, you showed you respected the inheritance from the previous Government and it was a case study in how research, business, and government could work together, which then led me to create several other leadership councils in other technology areas. And looking back, and again I didn't appreciate its significance, looking back that first meeting of the Space Leadership Council was important as well.

**HW: And you've touched on this in various ways, but do you have any other reflections on the policy-making process of the government?**

**DW:** It's very odd. There's serious expertise. I mean by and large, it is still the case that the policy debate within government is more sophisticated than outside government and close up people are considering more angles and have got better figures within the community of the insiders. The conversation within government is still by and large I have to say, pretty well informed and pretty sophisticated. So that's the good news.

The bad news as I said is it's incredibly weak on historical memory. And incredibly weak on stakeholder management – the kind of people you want to carry with you. Wanting to keep a decision private or confidential and announce it at the last moment to a startled world, which may maximise media impact but actually you won't help win people over to do it I always informally tried to tip off all the key people in advance. And if there was a reaction of horror, try and adjust what I said accordingly.

**HW: So that was your way of operating as a minister? How did you respond to that perceived inadequacy of stakeholder management in the Civil Service?**

**DW:** I don't know. It's hard to say. To take the obvious ones, Universities UK which has a President who is a Vice Chancellor, every two years, that person – throughout my time there were three different guys – I would have his mobile phone number and he would have mine and I would be texting him. And there would be, 'You can phone me up and we will talk about it and provided it doesn't leak, I'm very happy to

run things past you. But it mustn't leak and if it does start leaking then the communication will breakdown'. The President of the Royal Society similarly, 'You can tell me uncomfortable things but we need to have a line of communication, it's in our interests to be talking'. So people feel they've got that line of communication – incredibly important.

I probably didn't put enough into some of those lines of communication internally. The Treasury I had a reasonable link to. Number 10 was incredibly hard to work out how to deal with because in the early days Number 10 kept on reorganising. If it was very serious you would text Ed Llewellyn. If it wasn't serious enough to involve Ed Llewellyn, who else you dealt with and how was incredibly hard to work out. And for lots of areas you just had not really got a proper counterparty inside Number 10, for long periods of the Coalition it was very peculiar. It got better towards the end.

### **HW: What did you find most frustrating about being a minister?**

**DW:** From a machinery of government point of view, the structure of cabinet committees. We had thought there were going to be three main cabinet committees: an Economic Affairs Cabinet Committee, a Home Affairs Cabinet Committee and NSC [National Security Council] for overseas. And I knew partly from my discussions in Shadow Cabinet this is how Dave [Cameron] wants to do things.

So I am put on the Economic Affairs Cabinet Committee. And I can't remember the exact chronology, but it becomes clear very early on [that] the Economic Affairs Cabinet Committee is not meeting and is not a functioning committee. You can speculate about the reasons but it might have been that George [Osborne] didn't want to have Vince [Cable] coming in regularly and speaking across the whole range of domestic and economic policy. I understand George's reasons, but it actually became very frustrating.

So what you have instead of the main economic cabinet committee you had a plethora of micro-committees doing different things. And for me, who saw universities and sciences as both important for the real economy and wanted to give a science and technology input to lots of real economy decisions, it was incredibly frustrating that there was not a systematic government, real economy committee. But I remember EY, economic strategy from previous spells in government. There were bilaterals between George and Vince. It was me going to see George. There were lots of other ministers going to see George. There were various specific committees but there wasn't an overall economic committee.

Meanwhile the Home Affairs Committee chaired by Nick Clegg was absolutely functioning as the main domestic committee. So in my ambition to be on the Economic Affairs Committee, I'd gone for the wrong committee. So I then, and I can't remember how, I really wanted to be on the Home Affairs Committee. And partly because of all the university stuff and I managed to wangle, quite early on, a place on the Home Affairs Committee, which proved to be an incredibly important committee.

And then BIS was always frustrated that we didn't have a place on the NSC given our roles in exports and trade relations and whatever. But I think that may also have been a degree of wariness in Number 10 about Vince. So I ended up... being the BIS person on the Home Affairs Committee and that was incredibly useful. But I nearly missed it by a wrong assessment of how the cabinet structure would play out.

### **HW: How could government be made more effective from your point of view?**

**DW:** I think that the worst department of government by a long margin is the Cabinet Office: it is completely dysfunctional. And I speak as a former Cabinet Office minister under John Major. It's not accountable. It imposes absurd things on you. It then runs away when things don't work out and always blames you. It is a terrible department. Over-manned, too many ministers, and a lot of time was spent essentially trying to stop the Cabinet Office messing up things we were doing. So I think Cabinet Office is deeply dysfunctional.

There is a kind of an unspoken agenda, 'We've got to enhance the role of the Centre'. But they haven't really worked out how to do that. I would say oddly enough, not being involved in it so much, but I thought more on the foreign affairs/defence side and the NSC, the structure seemed to work. But the

rest of the Cabinet Office was terrible. I mean an IT system that didn't work in BIS which we had in about year three or four, which had been imposed because of this Cabinet Office hatred of big companies because they thought they were being ripped off by big companies. So we had an absurd small company that couldn't deliver an IT system and then it didn't work. And I stupidly said, 'It shows how wrong Cabinet Office is'. And the Cabinet Office is like, 'No, that's your decision, you're responsible, and you have to take the blame. This is a mishandled contract'.

And Number 10 it was quite tricky because it was bigger than I remembered. I'd worked there in the mid-eighties when there was a small policy unit, there was a small political staff, there was a press office and private office of Mrs T [*Thatcher*]. And working out who did what in Number 10, so if you have a middle-ranking issue in your own area who you actually phone up, proved for the first year or two incredibly hard to work out. Number 10 not giving some kind of sense of who does what and who to call and in what circumstances, and how you feedback and how you exchange things. And I increasingly came to the view that basically you got on with it and waited to see if anybody in Number 10 tried to stop you. I would have started with a much more high-minded view, communicate with them and find out their priorities. It proved very hard to get any clear sense of priorities.

**NH: What about other departments? You mentioned the formal structures of cabinet committees, but what about your working relationships with Education or other departments that you were in contact with regularly?**

**DW:** The Treasury I always fundamentally aimed to have a good working relationship with, not least because in those early days this deal [on the science budget] had been massively helpful. But BIS had by and large a poor relationship with the Treasury. It is one of the great dysfunctional relationships in government. Who is the economics ministry? Is the Treasury the economics ministry or BIS the economics ministry? How do you define it? Is [the Treasury] a finance ministry or economics ministry? Because you see the Treasury also see themselves in part as the economics ministry. That's the start of it. And then we have this kind of Lib Dem and Conservative tension on top. We made it work, but there was a tension there.

There was always a slightly self-important, slightly pompous internal BIS exercise on priorities for the real economy once or twice a year, leading to a rather pompous letter from the Secretary of State to the Chancellor pre-budgets and autumn statements on what we would like him to do which the Treasury would usually ignore. But I would go round and call on some of my old friends or the Chancellor's advisor and say, 'What's on your mind? What is going to be the theme of the budget? What are you trying to get out of this coming budget?' And they would tell me. Then you would go back and find out the things that BIS wanted to do that tied in with the Treasury's priorities.

So instead of trying to present yourself as the Treasury's economic equal that was reaching its own economic judgment, you'd say, 'All right, you're very worried about business investment. Okay, we need business investment. Here are some ideas about things that if you spent a bit of money on these technologies or these areas, put a bit of public money in, you will get private investments alongside, you'll get a 2:1 ratio. In fact, here are some of the companies that have told me that if we put in a bit of money they'll invest more. So if you want some business investment you might give this a go'. Something like RPIF [the Research Partnership Investment Fund], which was a competition for co-funding R&D facilities on universities, which began with £100 million of public money but the competition depended on universities finding commercial partners with twice that. So they had to find £200 million of commercial investment. And it all went very well. This originated in a message from the Treasury [that they] would love to promote more business investment. And that I found was a much better way of dealing with the Treasury than this official BIS approach.

They [the department] knew when I was out on manoeuvres. I wouldn't be completely secretive but they were always worried. I wouldn't turn up to George [Osborne] and say what a terrible letter you've had from BIS and ignore it. I wouldn't. What I said, a lot of them, would be items that were in the BIS ask list, but re-presented and re-prioritised in accordance with what I knew their [the Treasury's] priorities were. So the Treasury relationship I think worked.

The DfE relationship didn't really work because Michael [Gove] had free rein from Number 10 to talk about universities. He would happily talk about universities without ever clearing anything with me. So it was very peculiar. You would read the comments he made about universities without knowing in advance what he was going to say. And it was hard to get DfE to engage with our priorities. So we were interested in education exports, which they wouldn't really do. Education technology they wouldn't really do. So it wasn't really a satisfactory relationship there.

**NH: Just briefly on your relationships inside the department [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills], how did you make the relationship with Vince [Cable] work?**

**DW:** Fundamentally I have enormous respect for the guy. I saw a lot of my job – and what a lot of BIS officials didn't quite get – I saw a significant part of my job as explaining Vince's thinking to my political colleagues. So quite often they would say what's he up to, with different degrees of exasperation, 'What's he up to?' And you needed to have real intelligence on what he was up to, but also, and I don't know the extent to which this applies in a non-coalition world, but also explain the rationale. So you have to have genuine intelligence, you have to give them genuine information. I was trying to provide Vince with the information about what we were up to and why, and I was trying to explain to other people what Vince was up to. Not in a way that would dump on him but equally in a way that provided sometimes more information about what he was doing and why than he himself was volunteering.

So quite a lot of that because in a way one of the trickiest relationships in the Coalition, let's face it was Vince. If there was a Lib Dem who would have resigned about a disagreement on the fundamentals of policy, it would have been Vince. And knowing... so when he really did care strongly about something, tipping people off, 'This is something he really cares strongly about that', and we needed to handle this and engage with it and find something that was satisfactory for him. Now he had lots of other lines of communication as well but I saw that as I say rather peculiar role in the unusual dynamics of coalition.

**NH: And what about your private office? How did that function, obviously you had Nick [Hillman] advise you there?**

**DW:** They were good. I'm trying to think of examples. And definitely compared with my own experience of being a private secretary, the kind of constraints on what they would or would not do, are much narrower than the service I provided to Nigel Lawson and Nick Ridley 20 years earlier. But the culture has shifted. It is as if party politics is not a legitimate activity, which is one of my wider complaints. It's seen as something improper almost, but it's part of what makes a democracy function. No, they were incredibly hardworking and dedicated. I mean inevitably over time you end up with something like over 15 private secretaries in my four and a bit years. Overall, they were good and motivated.

**NH: So you felt adequately supported?**

**DW:** Yes. There were these bonkers ideas starting with the Cabinet Office, for mega private offices, which I thought would have been very bad, because you wanted the real policy experts in the department to come up to see you, you didn't want to create an alternative. You didn't want to create a second structure of mini experts within your own private office. And again, a further thing on all these issues, discussing them with Vince, we would have had an arms race within BIS. More special advisers, more private officers. Vince would have a bigger private office, I would have a bigger private office, and the job of the bigger private office would be demolishing each other's private office. There would have been distrustful escalation. So the best way to deal with Vince was relatively small private offices and he and I to talk about things his office was next to mine, he would come into my office to talk about things. I would go into his office to talk about things. We would have a proper catch up once a week – the two of us perhaps with a private secretary or a special adviser there – where we would fairly frankly go through the issues. That was a far better way of doing it than having mass ranks of sometimes conflict-creating supporters.

**NH: Great. And the final couple of questions, how would you define an effective minister?**

**DW:** Well a minister who gets things done, which is not as easy as it sounds. Getting things done in terms of change in the real world involves partly, as a minimum, securing consent and really going beyond that [to secure] active support. You have to have networks out there that want to do things that you want them to do.

**NH: Were there any ministers that you saw as good role models or had previously thought were very effective at that?**

**DW:** I would say within the Cabinet there were two schools of thought. There was one school of thought that basically worked with the machine and worked with stakeholders to try to make things happen. And as I say that was by and large, I think that was George's approach, by and large Vince's approach. And then there was a second set of ministers, who saw the Civil Service as the enemy, got into a state of conflict, often generated media headlines by virtue of the conflict, but were not necessarily achieving permanent changes as a result of that.

**NH: And what advice would you give to a minister who is starting in government for the first time? Or indeed is there anything you would have done differently with the benefit of hindsight?**

**DW:** I think I got frustrated too early on with how to deal with Number 10. I know it was an insolvable problem, but trying to find out who was really advising the PM. So there was too much stuff where they did things without telling me in the high tech area, and I would labour long and hard on something like Tech City without them necessarily fully understanding what you were doing and why. So I found the Number 10 relationship quite hard to crack.

But as I said the Treasury relationship was good. And you know probably in terms of making things happen, for many issues the Treasury relationship and the confidence on spending is crucial. I used to do things like if George [Osborne] provided me with some money for some project I had put to him, I would then, not even formally but six months on, 'You know that money you gave me for those incubator sites on the university campuses, I went the other day, you gave them the money six months ago and the building is already going up. It's going to be finished by the end of the year, do you want to go to the opening?' So the relationship with the Treasury matters a lot.

Respect stakeholders. I probably didn't do enough of the media, the political media, again I probably didn't invest enough in that. But for the political media story, the HE [higher education] story was very simple: the Lib Dems and the fees. So it was a Lib Dem issue. And on science they weren't that interested in science, which they thought that was a scary, geeky kind of a subject. So [we had] the challenge of making what we were doing on universities and science media friendly. And I deliberately, I wanted my special adviser, Nick Hillman, to be alongside me helping with the stakeholders, so they knew if they couldn't get hold of me, they'd get hold of him. Helping on the policy formation rather than a media-oriented spad [special adviser]. So some journalists did phone him but Nick knew my priority was not really the media side of things. So I didn't have a media-oriented spad.

**NH: Okay. That's all of our questions.**

**DW:** Good.

**NH: Is there anything else you wanted to say or like to get off your chest that we've missed?**

**DW:** The Civil Service is not a conspiracy to stop ministers doing things. That's the crucial angle. And by and large they will often warn you that something won't work. They're not always right, but it is very important... that is not [seen as] simply a bunch of boring do-nothings putting up objections for everything. It is worth trying to understand why they don't think it will work to see whether it's a valid reason and if there is a genuine concern that has to be tackled.

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