

# Ministers reflect

Jeremy Browne

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## Biographical details

### Electoral History

2010-2015: Member of Parliament for Taunton Deane

2005-2010: Member of Parliament for Taunton

### Parliamentary Career

2012-2013: Minister of State for Crime Prevention

2010-2012: Minister of State for Foreign Affairs

2007-2010: Shadow Treasury Minister

2007 (Jan-Dec): Shadow Minister for Home Affairs

2005-2007: Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs

*Jeremy Browne was interviewed by Jen Gold and Peter Riddell on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project*

**Peter Riddell (PR):** When you first started as a minister, what was the experience of coming into government like? What support was available? Had anything previously prepared you for the job?

**Jeremy Browne (JB):** Well, of course, you've got to remember with all the Liberal Democrats, the party hadn't been in government for 70 years or whatever it was. When I started the week of the election in 2010, my ambition for the week was to try and get re-elected as an MP. I had a majority of 573 and I was a top Ashcroft target seat [*pollster and Conservative donor Lord Ashcroft*]. So I won my seat and then was made a minister.

I was back in Taunton away from the coalition discussions that MPs were having and I popped into Tesco's to get a pint of milk and my mobile phone rang while I was looking at all of the newspapers on display in Tesco's which had the pictures of David Cameron and Nick Clegg on the front. And it was the Downing Street switchboard putting Nick Clegg, or as they put it, the Deputy Prime Minister, through to me to say that I was going to be a Minister of State in the Foreign Office, and I was standing in a car park in Tesco's in Taunton. So I got a phone call, I rang my mother, and then I got a phone call about 45 minutes later from my Private Secretary in the Foreign Office saying, 'We're all in the office awaiting your arrival'. I said, 'I'm still in Tesco's in Taunton! I'll come up tomorrow', this is a Thursday evening but 'I'll come up tomorrow, it'll be lovely to see you all'.

I then got the train for a day trip the next day, because I had promised to do various things in my constituency on Friday night and Saturday. My mobile phone rang again: 'It's the Downing Street switchboard, the Prime Minister would like to speak to you'. And the train was very busy and I thought I'm going to sound like a nutcase, saying congratulations Prime Minister on the phone! [*laughter*] So I rushed off to the loo, looking like I had some terrible illness. So my first conversation with the still current Prime Minister was in a First Great Western loo. Then as soon as we started talking we went into the tunnel, there's a bit of the route near Castle Carey, and he cut out. So I went back to my seat and he rang again and I rushed off back to the loo [with] all the people round me thinking, gosh this man really is ill, really isn't well at all! And I had a nice conversation with the Prime Minister in the loo. All of that is true; it gives a little bit of a sense it wasn't all... I wasn't waiting for my post in Westminster to be allocated.

Having said all of that, I can offer views on what I think the Foreign Office does well and less well. It's a Rolls Royce department. It gives you a very smooth ride but it doesn't go round corners very fast. And that is true, I think the Foreign Office could be a bit lighter on its feet sometimes, but in terms of giving a sort of a sense of an authoritative and effortless introduction to your brief, it is a strength of the department. I didn't actually have a brief by the way. That was another thing.

**PR:** Was any support offered to you, to explain how to be a minister so to speak?

**JB:** One thing I said to Nick Clegg in the Tesco's car park [was] 'Thank you that's fantastic, will I be a minister of state or an under-secretary [of state]?' He appeared not to be quite aware there was a distinction between the two. Well, of course, all of our Prime Ministers and Deputy Prime Ministers since John Major have not worked their way up through the ranks. It's a long time since we had a senior figure in government at that level who is either a Chancellor or Prime Minister who has ever been a junior minister. They'd never been on the 'shop floor' in ministerial terms and they don't actually know what junior ministers do. Cameron, Osborne, Clegg, Blair, Brown have never even really run a department if you don't count the Treasury as a normal department, let alone been a junior minister, whereas normally you have to go through it.

So I said, 'What is my [role]? What will my responsibilities be? I'm assuming I won't be the Europe minister, I'll be amazed if the Conservatives were willing to have the Lib Dem as the Europe minister, even me and I'm fairly Eurosceptic'. And he said, 'We haven't got round to talking', you know, it was

clearly fairly chaotic.

When I turned up at the department and had a private office of five and they sat around a table not much bigger than this one and they said 'Hello minister very nice to meet you etc.', and I said, 'I don't wish to be rude, lovely you're all here, but I haven't really got the faintest idea of what all of you do. So would you mind going around the table and not just saying what your names are, but explaining to me what your jobs are?' So they basically explained how a ministerial private office works to me, which is not that complicated a concept. So each one said, 'I'm doing this and subject to your approval Minister, we're looking to organise this, that, and the other'. So yeah, my starting point wasn't 'Oh, I'm going to get to grips with this machine'. My first question was, 'How does the machinery work? How am I connecting to the department? What, when you get up each morning, what do each of you envisage doing?'

#### **PR: There was no proper induction process at all?**

**JB:** Well no, actually as chance happened, because they knew they were going to get a new minister, they just didn't know who. I think they probably worked on the assumption it probably wouldn't be a Lib Dem. It might have been a Conservative. So in a way the whole thing was set up for 'the minister', they just didn't know who the person would be that would walk in the door.

Then we had a bit of a shenanigan on the portfolios. I ended up actually, I think probably to a large degree much more positive because I had an astute private secretary who did a bit of a land grab on my behalf, who managed to get me most of Asia, which in the Foreign Office, it's rather good to have that! So I no longer had overseas territories, which some people do like, the Conservatives like, but it's quite micro. Apart from I kept the Falklands which is arguably the most interesting one to keep. But I had that and Asia and Latin America.

There was some talk that I would just do Latin America, which was felt to be an insufficient level of responsibility at minister of state level on its own. So somehow well before the mould had set, I had managed to get all of Pacific Asia as well and I had sort of an emerging economies theme.

So once that had all taken shape, which to be honest was a little bit before I worked out quite who was who and what was what, it worked out very well for me because they were the areas that I was interested in doing. But I think it was as much by chance as it was by design.

They were then very good, the Foreign Office are good at this sort of thing, not at having an induction process that would be recognised by a HR department, but at getting the relevant people from the directorates and talking me through all the relevant issues in the countries in quite a systematic and methodical way. The Civil Service is good and the Foreign Office is particularly good at distilling fairly complicated ideas into digestible form for ministers. That's the sort of job they do well.

#### **PR: Were there any surprising things in the first few weeks?**

**JB:** I'm trying to think back. Well one thing that was culturally quite strange was that everybody else in the ministerial team was in a different political party than me. So I felt a little bit 'fly on the wall' in some of the discussions. It's a bit like, I never watch it, but you know the Big Brother household that after a while people forget they are on [TV] and start behaving normally. [They] certainly started gossiping about each other when I was present, whereas it was a bit more guarded initially.

But I also remember William Hague did these things: in many ways the best hour of the week was when we had a ministerial team meeting at 9am on a Wednesday in the Foreign Secretary's excellent office. I have been told that has been discontinued now, which is a shame because it's quite a hard ministerial team for people to manage because people are travelling.

The meetings were a combination of, well literally putting the world to rights. When people say we had a meeting and we put the world to rights, it's the first time I've actually had that and thought that was a literal description of what it did! So we used to go round pretty much continent by continent and

William Hague's grasp was very impressive from the beginning. But also Keith Simpson his PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary] added a degree of jollity into proceedings. They lasted exactly an hour and they were both improving and quite amusing meetings. I remember sitting in the first one and slightly pinching myself that there wasn't this meeting happening for real somewhere else and this wasn't the shadow equivalent. To be fair I think probably quite a lot of them felt like that because they hadn't been in government for 13 years. Although with that [it was also] a strange ministerial team, because every other minister had been an MP in the '92-'97 Parliament. So actually when Europe came up, it's still in a way psychologically... so it was William Hague, David Lidington, Alistair Burt and Henry Bellingham [who] were the four Commons ministers, and two of the four lost their seats in '97, Alistair and Henry and then both got back in obviously. There was quite a lot of shared psychological history of the Conservative Party that I was aware of but had pre-dated my role in Parliament [by] quite a long way.

**PR: Let's just jump ahead to when you went to the Home Office. How different was that as an experience?**

**JB:** Very, very different. Although I think that is because the Foreign Office is the exception rather than the Home Office. I think had I been a transport minister before I might have found the Home Office less of a culture leap. It's a bit like going from an Oxbridge senior common room to going to work for a local council. It's just terribly hard not to lapse into cliché when I say it's less rarefied. The Foreign Office is not quite as elite and detached as the cliché has it and the other areas do not quite conform to the cliché as well but there's truth in it.

It's quite strange going from an old into a new building. That's not necessarily a bad thing, there's quite a lot of advantages to newer buildings. I don't remember any trade union noticeboards above the photocopiers in the Foreign Office urging employees to go on strike and defy the ministers that they were notionally meant to be serving. I thought 'Gosh what is going on?' So in that way it felt more unionised and public sector-y.

I think the other thing is the Foreign Office is sort of unashamedly intellectual and the Home Office, maybe it depends on the particular character of the Secretary of State, was not so keen about that. Let me give an example: we used to have conversations quite often in the Foreign Office about the potential implications of the rise of China, not just British foreign policy but the world in the 21st Century. Of course, the meetings were longer on... there were a lot of clever people, though you could argue people start competing with each other to demonstrate how clever they were. But the meetings didn't really have any action points. You get to the end of this two and half to three hour internal conversation and you think lots of people have said some quite interesting things; you could argue a 'so what', somebody who was goal-orientated might have felt this meeting was sort of interesting up to a point, but what were you going to do as a result of this meeting was a little bit vaguer. But I used to be quite in favour of them because I used to think, well, if the Foreign Office isn't thinking about the rise of China, who the hell is? You can't contract all of this out to universities or think tanks. We're a P5 member, we're a G7 member, our foreign ministry should have the capacity to think through big foreign policy challenges with people who are up to doing that. So I quite approved of that.

But when I went to the Home Office and I was the minister responsible for crime prevention among other things, I said, 'I'm very interested to get to talk through in much greater detail why we think crime is falling, if indeed it is falling and what we can do to continue to get it to fall, or at the very least to prevent it from rising again'. I had in mind the sort of conversations that we might have. And that clearly wasn't quite [what they did]. They said, 'Well, yeah what do you have in mind? We've got an academic who has done a bit on this, and would you like to meet him?' I ended up saying 'Well yeah, next time he's in London ask him to drop in that'll be great'. But I had in mind a slightly 'let your hair down', a sort of exploratory conversation because crime is complicated as a 'nature of society' [issue]. It's a bit like the rise of China, there really isn't 'an' answer but it'll be interesting to explore this territory. It seemed that if the Home Office were not doing it, again, who was going to do it? The Home Office didn't see itself in such expansive terms. I think it was slightly discouraged and quite a defensive mind set. Success constituted getting to the end of the week without being blamed for anything.

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Whereas the Foreign Office, apart from Europe which is obviously a heavily politicised issue, can operate a bit detached from the politics. Being a Foreign Office minister felt a bit, some of the time, particularly my bits, felt like I was on a sabbatical from being an MP. Whereas being a Home Office minister – I'll give you an example – the Foreign Office does no legislation, apart from a bit of Europe which wasn't me. I didn't sit in a single committee for two and half years. I hardly spoke in the House of Commons. I did a few Westminster Hall adjournment debates on what the fashionable domestic issues were in my portfolio. So Burma would be the only country that would come up in South-East Asia because there's a Burma lobby in Britain essentially.

In the Foreign Office questions, I felt a bit like, I've never played golf but where people lug around their clubs and they take a really obscure club that you almost certainly won't use in your entire round of golf. But you could find yourself in a particular pickle in a particularly difficult bunker and be pleased that you lugged around this one club which would extract you from your predicament. I felt like that club in Foreign Office questions. I would sit there for ages and the questions would all be about the European Union and the Middle East and America and I'd think I'm going to get through the whole hour without saying a word. But I was there in case somebody asked something tricky about Ecuador and everybody would look at me! [laughter] But you could sit through the whole hour and the words China or India or Brazil did not come up in a whole hour of Foreign Office questions. So as I say this maybe would have felt less the case if I'd been the Europe minister. Maybe I would have been a bit more... but I was thinking 'Gosh, two-thirds of the world's population is in the bits that I have lead responsibility for'. The great phenomena of our time, which is the switch in power from West to East, is the phenomena that I was responsible for, and no one in British Parliament appears to be very interested.

We are in, it's sort of the prism of quite domestic concerns. I mean on South Korea, a G20 country, one thing that would come up most often in letters is that people didn't like it that they eat dogs. The Secretary General of the United Nations is from South Korea, and their companies are Samsung, LG, Kia and Hyundai and they've got the next Winter Olympic Games. I felt, in a complacent Western way we had not made the adjustment to seeing how significant these countries are and the implications for us. So the reason I say all of that is [because it explains] the whole sort of disconnect [I felt] between Parliament and the domestic debate and spending a third of my time on the other side of the world in all of these great economies.

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

**PR:** When you moved to the Home Office was there a clear agenda in the priorities you had?

**JB:** No. I'll give you an insight, which is I saw Nick Clegg and Alistair Carmichael who was the Lib Dem Chief Whip at the time and he said, 'We would like to move you from being a Minister of State of the Foreign Office to a Minister of State in the Home Office'. And I said, 'That's your call'.

There's a whole separate bit about what it said about the psychology of Nick Clegg in late 2012, when he started vacating great offices of state-type departments – it's the beginning of when I think he and the Lib Dems stopped thinking as a governing party that speaks to the country and started thinking about how to try and keep the show on the road to 2015 by talking internally to themselves, rather than thinking more expansively. But anyway, that's a separate story.

I said, 'Well there are two Minister of State jobs in the Home Office traditionally, there's the police one and there's the immigration one and which one will I do?' And they said, 'We're not quite sure about that, where we've got to on bits and pieces'. I quite quickly realised when I turned up in the Home Office that I wasn't doing either of them. And I'm not saying I was that upset I wasn't the immigration minister or that surprised that Theresa May [*Home Secretary*] didn't want a Lib Dem being immigration minister. But the two traditional big Minister of State jobs in the department, I was the only Lib Dem in

the department, some Lib Dems might have seen me as the sort of Deputy Home Secretary who was meant to have the status of being the junior coalition partner's Minister in the department. And yet in portfolio terms, which is significant for the civil servants because the whole department is structured to feed up through the ministers in portfolio terms, I was given the office of the departing Under-Secretary Lords minister who is responsible for all the micro bits and pieces that none of the other ministers wanted to do. And when this was pointed out that this was probably not, as would be conventionally be understood as a Minister of State status job, the first reaction was that extra micro-bits should be thrown at it to try and make it a bigger lump of micro-bits.

Then what my title would be was the next discussion in the first week. This is another Rotary Club-type anecdote but it's true, that one of the suggestions was I'd be the Minister of State for 'Crime Reduction and Prevention', which if you do the acronym was arguably quite close to what my some people might have wanted my responsibilities to amount to! So that probably put me off on a slightly unhappy foot.

But I think it also demonstrated a bit, in a wider way, that the Conservatives had more feel for the machinery of government. And the Lib Dems, by the time the Lib Dems were no longer sort of innocents abroad and had got more of a grip on it all, and this is almost two and half years in, the game was up a bit. I mean you'd have to speak to Nick Clegg, but in my two ministerial appointments, neither of them did the Deputy Prime Minister appear to have any idea at all what my portfolio responsibilities would be at the point I was appointed to them. And in a department, it does matter. It's not just the title. It does matter. And the civil servants even as they seek to be impartial, they'd worked there for 15 years and they know traditionally who was regarded as having greater responsibilities than the other person. If you give somebody a grand title and very limited responsibilities and you put them in the office of the person who previously didn't have as many responsibilities, it sends a message of, maybe it ought not to, but it did.

**PR: Clearly there was a massive difference in your two jobs between how you spent your week?**

**JB:** Completely different. They weren't like moving from one department to another department of the same company. They were like getting a completely different job. When I was a Foreign Office Minister, it was great because I didn't have, I've got a daughter now, but I didn't have any children [then]. I hope I would have applied myself in the same way as I did. I really threw myself into it. I mean the Prime Minister mentioned to me as an aside, he said something like, 'I'm travelling almost as much as you are, and no minister travels as much as you, you know'. I became the world's greatest authority on the relative merits of business class lounges in different airports around the world. I mean I actually did. I had to stop myself lapsing into conversations about whether the coffee was better in Hong Kong or Singapore! So I'd typically spend a week away at a time because it wasn't worth going for less. But normally I'd travel over a weekend. Spend Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday in situ and travel back over the following weekend, which in local MP terms meant I had two void weekends which was a problem. So sometimes actually I'd have a slightly mad schedule which I would go down to my constituency on Thursday, spend Friday as the constituency MP and then late on Friday night or even very early on Saturday morning a car would pick me up in Taunton and drive me straight to Heathrow to fly me off to China or whatever it might be. And then I would charge around there.

So my last ministerial trip I did as a Foreign Office minister wasn't entirely typical; but it wasn't untypical either. I spent Monday in Thailand, Tuesday in Cambodia, Wednesday in Ho Chi Minh City in southern Vietnam, and Thursday in Hanoi in northern Vietnam and Friday in Hong Kong and back again. So they were quite gruelling and I would get quite detached. I remember when all of the proposals for the new constituency boundaries were published, which obviously matters to an MP, I was in Tokyo and there's no point reading the BBC website coverage of it. The level of detail that MPs were interested in is way greater than any general report would be. But it wasn't just that you could read the report, it was actually you almost needed to be in the House of Commons to feel the gossip, because you knew that all the MPs were talking about it. And I was literally at the other side of the world. I was ten thousand miles away so you feel a bit detached from them.

It's also quite physically gruelling because I would do a schedule and then I would be back for a couple of weeks. I'd quite often get back on a Sunday and I'd have a whole week of constituency signing and bits and pieces. So I worked most of the Sunday. And then I would start in the Foreign Office on Monday. And I'd be back for a few weeks and then I'd fly off in the opposite direction and I'd do a week in Latin America. Then at the Home Office I had much less reason to go anywhere and I would much more reliably be in the constituency on Friday and so on.

Also I was struck that the Home Office took its tempo from the House of Commons. So when the House of Commons was not sitting it was noticeably a more relaxed pace. Whereas when it was sitting it was very... legislation and there would be lots of urgent questions which the Speaker was accepting. And there was a sort of sense of constantly being a bit under siege from parliamentary scrutiny. Whereas at the Foreign Office, I would forget whether Parliament was sitting or not. They'd say, we've scheduled for you to meet the ambassador of so and so and I suddenly realised that was all in a recess, the sort of Whitsun recess where I could've been in my constituency. But I hadn't really thought that in three weeks' time Parliament wasn't sitting. There was a sense that because we had a majority of 70 or 80, maybe it's a little bit different now, but in voting terms, my vote wasn't needed.

**PR: An interesting issue has come up; did you feel you were losing touch with both the Commons and your party colleagues?**

**JB:** A bit with the Commons as a Foreign Office minister but I suspect that was a result of being a Foreign Office minister as distinct from being a Lib Dem Foreign Office minister. You'd have to ask Hugo Swire whether he, my successor, had the same. And even actually not just a Foreign Office minister but my bit. If you're a Europe minister you know it's a day trip or one night in Brussels and back, so you'd get a sense you don't quite notice they've gone missing. Whereas during divisions or something, you think I haven't seen person x for a week, now you mention it, yeah, he isn't around very much and people used to joke about it occasionally.

The Lib Dem bit, yes, definitely. I felt and I think this was probably an issue for the Lib Dems generally, that I was left to my own devices really. We had a weekly ministers' team meeting, Lib Dem ministers, but (a) I missed quite a lot of them because I was a Foreign Office minister, so I wasn't in the country. But (b) they were inevitably rather general and they tended to focus a bit on the issues of the week and the issues of the week were hardly ever foreign policy, so they won't be my issues, they were a vote on, you know, tuition fees, or the obvious and more politicised issues.

I think if I was advising a future junior partner in a coalition government, I would recommend having monthly meetings of ministerial clusters. I'd bring together the ministers in the Foreign Office and Defence and DfID [Department for International Development], and have one hour in the first week of each month with them and talk about what they've done in the last month and what their ambitions are for the next month. We didn't have that. So quite long periods would pass where William Hague had much more of an idea of what I was doing than Nick Clegg. Of course, there was an additional dimension because I used to have meetings with the Europe Director in the Foreign Office because I was the Lib Dem minister, which you wouldn't otherwise. Hugo Swire wouldn't do that now. [I did that] because I was meant to be keeping abreast of the whole world but without anything like the [support]. You know, the Foreign Office is good at keeping the Foreign Secretary abreast of the whole world, not at keeping other ministers.

The worst one was when I was doing an internal flight in New Zealand and I was chronically jetlagged and the Private Secretary with me said, 'Oh yes, we need a sign off on something which the Lib Dems are concerned about, to do with...' and I really, it was just quite hard, it was in the middle of the night in Britain and they wanted it done by the start of the day, so I had to do it. It felt quite dysfunctional to be on a flight from I don't know wherever it was, Wellington to Christchurch in a small plane seat with virtually no room, trying to look at some submission.

**PR: But do you think the machine adapted to the existence of the coalition?**

**JB:** To an extent. It was all pretty collegiate in the Foreign Office. So I think it was less of a problem than it might have been. The Foreign Office, apart from Europe, has quite a collegiate approach generally, and I always got the sense that William Hague and Nick Clegg had quite a strong working relationship. Whereas Theresa May and Nick Clegg did not have a strong working relationship. In fact they had a completely dysfunctional working relationship as far as I could gauge. I felt I was in a pretty much impossible position where the gap between what were my two bosses if you like was unbridgeable.

I think that communicated itself a bit to the department. So anything that I was doing that felt it had anything to do with Nick Clegg, the Home Secretary and her special advisers would go out of the way to make it difficult. And anything I was doing which was the normal functions of the department if it had been a one party government, I would be getting some mood music out of Nick Clegg's office that this was all far too collegiate and cooperative when they wanted more grit in the oyster. I think well I can't just be grit in the oyster because I'm also a minister in the Government having ministerial team meetings with the Home Secretary. And I can't behave like I'm an opposition MP, I'm a government minister.

**PR: So you were caught in the crossfire?**

**JB:** Yes. But I think it may be even harder because I think the Lib Dems, which is partly why we now have eight MPs, my view is that we never resolved whether we wanted to be a governing party or we wanted to be an opposition party in government, and there is a distinction between the two.

**Jen Gold (JG): We've spent time focusing on the challenges you faced. We also wanted to ask what you feel was your greatest achievement was in office. Is there something that you're particularly proud of, it could be in either post that you held?**

**JB:** I think the greatest transformational change of this era in history is the rise of China and the shift of global power from a narrow set of Western industrialised nations to a much broader set, predominantly but not exclusively in Asia. And how Britain and other Western countries adapt to that to remain relevant and relatively prosperous and maintain conventional diplomatic links, peaceful as well as wealthy. Everything else we talk about, almost, if you came to write an essay in 200 years' time about this period in history, you'd wonder why everyone was obsessing about that, compared to the massive change which is that the pre-eminence of the West that existed since the Industrial Revolution or the Renaissance if you want to go [back that far], is coming to end to some extent on our watch.

I suspect quite a lot of people would say that, 'I managed to get new regulations on blah, blah, blah'. What I felt most pleased with was to try and work through into government a broader understanding of the necessity to try and engage in policy terms with this great phenomenon.

I'll give you an example: we had a sub-committee of the National Security Committee. So I had a thematic lead responsibility in the department for emerging powers. The civil servant who did it with me was called Barbara [Woodward] is now our ambassador in Beijing – most senior female ambassador in history. So what we tried to think of is how can we develop relationships with these countries which aren't about us as the traditional power telling them what they should be doing? It's no longer quite the 'take it or leave it' from the West. Traditionally countries have had to either go along with the American-led, Western led view of the world or not. Now they're able to formulate their alternative views of the world and we have to think a bit about how much we accommodate those.

But also if you're someone like say the Mexican President, the biggest issue of concern maybe for you is internal security issues. And you may actually value your relationship with Britain even more if the Metropolitan Police can help in terms of police training. And you may actually see value in the relationship with the Home Office more than the Foreign Office or at least as great an extent as the Foreign Office. But that's weird because the Home Office is not judged on how well they accommodate our relations with Mexico. They're judged on immigration and crime in Britain. So to try and get the Home Office to engage on the value for the Government as a whole, in them participating in a whole day of talks with the Mexicans, requires quite a leap of imagination. They'd say, 'We don't have anyone in the Home Office who does Mexico'. I said, 'No, no, I didn't really expect you to. What I just want you to do is

while we have this programme rather than them sitting around having lots of conversations with the Foreign Office people, they can do that some of the day, we can make Home Office meetings a component of the schedule, which demonstrates that we have potential value to them in areas that they care about, not just what we care about.'

And you can go through; there are lots of [examples]. The Brazilians – there is a fantastic opportunity to forge strong relationships with them based on the fact that we had the Olympics and they have the next Olympics. So they were very receptive to us, including commercial relationships around companies who specialised in online ticketing and bits of the security. And it gave us an advantage over France or Germany for example, in terms of an ability to get doors opened in Brazil and demonstrate value to them and utility in the relationship which could then be broadened out into other areas. But it did mean if we had senior incoming Brazilians that it was quite good to have the buy-in of the Culture Department, for example, as well as them just sitting around with the Foreign Office. So it's a bit intangible. I can't say, here is the regulation, but when as he did a fortnight ago, George Osborne is with big delegations in China, with the Chinese President here next week, I'm not saying it wouldn't have happened without me, that's a bit presumptuous, but I was part of, to use Boris Johnson-esque type metaphors, I was part of the scrum pushing strongly in that direction.

**JG: One of the other questions we had was what you think defines an effective minister and what advice you would have for someone going into office for the first time, based on your experience?**

**JB:** I think it's a very difficult question because it depends what the purpose of you is as a minister. I suspect quite a lot of Lib Dems came to define their role as achieving a prize, probably quite a micro prize in the grand scheme of things, that they could champion as being distinctly theirs and which they could claim with some plausibility may not have happened had the Conservatives been in government on their own. If you listen to the Lib Dem general election campaign, it's basically a string of these types of achievements. A lot of them are very heavily orientated towards reassuring Lib Dem activists. And they would have been seen in those terms to have 'succeeded' as a minister.

But I suspect from the Conservative Secretary of State point of view, they were just getting on with the remaining 98% of the agenda of the department and if the Lib Dems were really just wanting to own this 2% issue and go on about it the whole time, they could pretty much live with that. The reason I say this, is this cuts into a wider critique I came to have of the Lib Dems' position in the coalition, which is I felt right through from beginning to end that we, the Lib Dems, needed to own, 'the Government as a whole'. We couldn't compete with Labour as being a superior opposition to the Conservatives from within government than Labour were from without government.

So my approach would be much more collegiate. I said on my first day with William Hague, with the caveat it was always easier in the Foreign Office than in many departments, but I spoke to him on the phone because he was abroad and I said, 'I don't see my role as to try and make your life difficult, I want the Government to be a success and achieve its agreed objectives and I want the Foreign Office to be regarded as the most successful department in the Government. And though it's presumptuous of me to say so I'd be delighted if you were regarded as a very successful Foreign Secretary. I see it as my role to try and help and bring these objectives about.'

My feeling is that I helped to contribute to what I thought was a successful British government between 2010 to 2013 when I was in it, and between 2010 and 2015 when I supported it in the House of Commons. But in a way, unless you're the Prime Minister it's quite hard to say it would have been radically different without me. Because with most organisations if you take any person out, the organisation continues to function, but everyone cumulatively adds up to the end result. I mean I had various initiatives that I, you know, oversaw in legislative terms as a Home Office minister. But if I'm honest, if another person had been given the job, they would probably have overseen many of the same initiatives.

**PR: What was most frustrating?**

**JB:** What was frustrating? The Home Office was frustrating. It was frustrating to have effectively two line managers who had completely irreconcilable differences. It was frustrating having a secretary of state's office that sought to make my life harder rather than easier. When I was a minister in the Home Office, I lost a vote in committee putting forward an objective which was the Government's objective as agreed by the Home Secretary, and would have been in the programme had it been a Conservative majority and I lost the vote because two or three Conservative backbench MPs rebelled. I thought blimey! This is pretty thankless stuff. I am sitting on some committee presiding over different grievances in the Conservative Party, where the Conservatives from above me, i.e. the Home Secretary, are not making life easy, and the Conservatives below me i.e. backbench notionally government-supporting MPs, are not making my life easy as well. And yet the Deputy Prime Minister is probably thinking I'm finding this all too agreeable by half, if only he knew the whole truth of it.

But generally that's maybe a symptom of being at the Home Office. I think if you've spoken to quite a few Conservative ministers from the Home Office they may not say anything radically different from that as well. You always in politics think the world would be a better place if you had more of a prominent position and are able to have more influence. That's the nature of politicians!

**JG: Is there anything you would have done differently in hindsight in the way you approached either ministerial role?**

**JB:** If my only aim was to of stayed as a government minister longer I would have been a more factional, disruptive influence in my department in order to demonstrate, when that became a fashionable modus operandi of the Lib Dems, that I was in tune with the fashion, but I disagreed with the fashion.

There are lots of individual things I could've done better. Maybe I suppose in each department there is something to be said for, if you knew that you were going to be a minister in x department in three months' time, it would be quite a useful exercise to spend three months trying to think what your aims and objectives would be for that department. Because of the nature of being in politics it's in you go and it's quite hard, you're learning on the job the whole time. So I suppose compared to what you might get in a more corporate environment perhaps, it wasn't entirely clear quite often – you had to sort of try and evolve your own objectives and then it wasn't entirely clear sometimes what the department's objectives were or the government's objectives were. So you were slightly, in management terms, some of the government could be a bit dysfunctional.

**PR: Did you have enough support? I mean because only midway through was the number of Lib Dem special advisers expanded. Was there enough support for you?**

**JB:** Definitely not before that. As a Foreign Office Minister I had fairly substantial responsibilities that if it had been a one-party government would've taken a lot of time to discharge, as well as being a Member of Parliament, in a fairly marginal seat and wanting to do that job properly as well. So I wasn't short of things to do.

Then there was a third dimension which was to try and speak up for the Lib Dems, so I'd be on Question Time or something, which is additional to do with my ministerial responsibilities or being a Member of Parliament for Taunton Deane, and having to try and mug up on debates about health and education and things so I was equipped to do those programmes.

But also in a way, a fourth strand, I was meant to be the Lib Dem that did all foreign affairs stuff. So I would go to internal Lib Dem meetings where they would want to know what the Government was thinking about Syria or the EU negotiations, despite the fact I'd just come back from Peru and Mongolia. And of course, the department, particularly the Home Office was much more comfortable with politics than the Foreign Office. When I was on something like Question Time, the Foreign Office didn't like me doing a briefing in the Foreign Office. So I used to go and do them in Portcullis House even though I was appearing on the programme in part as a government minister. Whereas when I went to the Home Office and I was on a programme like that and I said do you think I better go over to Portcullis House,

they all looked at me as if I was completely mad. They said, 'No, what do you want to do that for? It looks like it's raining outside, we'll get everyone over to your office here'. The Foreign Office was much more rarefied and as a result they were a little bit prissy about touching anything that could be seen as vaguely political.

So you ended up with this slightly bizarre thing, that the only person in the entire Foreign Office who was able to speak or felt permitted to speak about the views of the junior coalition partner of the Government was me. Even if I was 11 time zones away they'd say, 'Oh well, we'll just check'. So Nick Clegg's obviously said 'This would be good if it went through Jeremy Browne, this Europe directive stuff', but I was on the other side of the world, and in practical terms, how do you put it through? And something that was even quite straightforward, my Private Office wouldn't sign it off, because they were there for me as a minister, rather than as a representative of the junior party in government. So that was all pretty dysfunctional.

So the special advisers network was meant to address that and it did to an extent. The only thing that made it a bit odd, even though there were quite a lot of people, it wasn't very highly powered. Some of the people were quite junior. There's quite a big difference between a special adviser who is the Deputy Prime Minister's person at your department as opposed to your person in government. So they'd quite often come along and say, 'What are you doing about X, Y and Z?' to which I would say, 'Well I'm doing a bit of this and bit of that and a bit of the other'. And I would say, 'What about what we might do about A, B and C?', and they'd say, 'That didn't come up in our team meeting'. And I'd say, 'No, no, what I'm suggesting is that we might look to do more of that'. But I felt I was a bit on the receiving end without that arrangement necessarily helping me to project ideas that I would have. Whereas if you were a Cabinet minister, the special advisers were then an arm of your operation rather than an arm of the overall operation.

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