

Ministers reflect

Andrew Mitchell



December 2015

Andrew Mitchell

Biographical details

Electoral History

2001-2015: Member of Parliament for Sutton Colfield

1987-1997: Member of Parliament for Gedling

Parliamentary Career

2012 (Sept-Oct): Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury and Chief Whip

2010-2012: Secretary of State for International Development

2005-2010: Shadow Secretary of State for International Development

2004-2005: Shadow Minister for Home Affairs

2003-2004: Shadow Minister for the Treasury

1995-1997: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security

Andrew Mitchell was interviewed by Tom Gash and Jen Gold on 9th June 2015 for Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project

Jen Gold (JG): Thinking back to beginning of the last Parliament, what was your experience of entering government like?

Andrew Mitchell (AM): Well I'd been in government before as a government whip from '92 to '95, and then I was social security minister from '95 to '97, following which I was tipped out of Parliament by an ungrateful electorate! Being a government whip, you tend to know everything about everything that's happening around Whitehall because the 16 Government whips cover every MP on their own side and every department around Whitehall. I looked after DTI [Department of Trade and Industry] under Michael Heseltine and Health and enjoyed it very much. And then going from there into a department, that's the right way round to do it, because the whip's training I suspect makes you a better departmental minister. It certainly makes you more responsive to the House of Commons.

You know, many ministers think that the job would be glorious if it wasn't for the fact that they had to keep on going down and explaining themselves to the House of Commons. But that's how it should be. A good legislature keeps the executive straight and holds them to account. And actually, Speaker Bercow – who's been roundly attacked from time to time – to be fair to him, he's good at holding the executive to account. And in this Parliament you're going to see, I suspect, the executive held to much greater account by the legislature, partly because the legislature is showing signs already of being more bolshy than in the past, and secondly because the Government has only got a very small majority.

I went from being a whip to being a junior minister. I then left Parliament and then I came back in 2001. I joined the Shadow Cabinet in 2005 and spent five years looking after International Development which gave me a really good chance to work up a centre-right policy in my policy area. Opposition is awful and difficult, but the one thing you can do is prepare for the time when you may have the privilege of being in government.

And so I arrived in government as one of the few members of Cameron's coalition Cabinet who had been in government before. I'd been both a whip and a junior minister. And I set about making our reforms in the Department for International Development [DfID] to make it more of a department of state for promoting international development, and less of a well-upholstered NGO moored off the coast of Whitehall. And I set about making the reforms – cutting the admin expenditure but preparing for the work of the department to receive a very significant budget uplift. And the policy priority was to turn the work of the department into more about conflict resolution, more about building prosperity, and at the heart of all of it, delivering results so that the British public could see that when 100 pence of their hard-earned taxes were spent on development, they were actually getting a pound of delivery on the ground. And I came in with that policy. I produced a green paper in opposition, the civil servants had all read it, they knew what we wanted to do; we just set about doing it. That's what we did for two and a half years.

Then I became the government chief whip; a job I would have enjoyed. Not a job I wanted, I didn't seek it, the Prime Minister asked me to do it. I told him I wasn't the right person, partly because I'd been offshore in doing my job as International Development Secretary, travelling a lot and therefore wasn't... I didn't know many of the 2010 intake well. But out of loyalty to the Prime Minister and because I think on the whole you should do what you're asked by the Prime Minister if you possibly can, I agreed to move. And that was cut short by an incident you may have read about at the gates of Downing Street.

JG: Was there anything that took you by surprise in your first few weeks as the Secretary of State for International Development?

AM: Yes. Some of the senior civil servants were a little unwilling to engage. There wasn't a big table in the Secretary of State's office. I asked what had happened and I was told my predecessor had had it removed – he didn't like big meetings with civil servants. So I said if it didn't look too self-aggrandising I wanted it put back so I could have a more consultative approach.

4 Ministers reflect

And I had five big meetings with civil servants where I would talk to them about the changes we wanted to make in the different areas of policy. And I would ask what they thought and they would all nod and so on. And it wasn't funnily enough until one of my special advisers – I had two brilliant special advisers – one of them piped up in the meeting and said, 'Actually, Secretary of State you're wrong about that' and I said, 'Why?' and they explained. And I then said to the civil servants, 'They're right. I am wrong about this.' And with that the scales fell and the civil servants started to intervene and tell me what they thought. And once that had happened we got a much better dialogue. We would have intense debates about the priorities of international development for Britain, and once we'd argued it all out, I would decide and then they'd get on with it. So that was my only real surprise.

I take a slightly different view from a lot of my former Cabinet colleagues in that I believe the British Civil Service is one of the jewels in the crown in Britain. And I think that there has been a tendency for senior politicians to beat up on the Civil Service, and to try sometimes to politicise it. Mr Blair was the arch villain of this. But also, the Coalition Government toyed with the idea of having far more political advisers and so forth. I think that is wrong. And I once said in Cabinet that I thought that hitting a Rolls Royce engine with a blunt instrument was not the right way to reform the Civil Service. I found them extremely engaged. I found them extremely good. And I enjoyed working in the Department for International Development, not least because the cohort of civil servants were extremely bright and extremely committed, and worked very hard and were very good at their jobs.

When I left university, the people who wanted to join the Civil Service wanted to go either to the Foreign Office or the Treasury above all. By the time I was Secretary of State, it had changed to either DfID or the Treasury.

Tom Gash (TG): Was there any kind of support available for you in the job? Obviously you had your advisers. Was any other support offered to you to help you hit the ground running as Secretary of State?

AM: I had a whole department for support. No, I mean in the run-up to the election, under the rules, I had seen the Permanent Secretary on three occasions for detailed meetings and I said to her, 'I will speak for 20 minutes about what I want to do, and you won't interrupt me, and I propose then that you should come back in a week or so and give me your view about what I said today, for 20 minutes, and I will try hard not to interrupt you. And then we'll see where we go from there'. And that's what we did. I spent 20 minutes expanding on our green paper, which she'd obviously read, and then she came and she told me what she thought the pitfalls were. And it was a good process and a most important one.

So then the night I was appointed, she and the senior officials came round to my office in the House of Commons. And then we went back into the department. I had previously told the special advisers that everyone who wants to see a secretary of state has to go through the private office. But there is a door into the Secretary of State's office and that is for the use of the special advisers only, who have direct access. And that is a tradition in the Civil Service. And I remember on the first night we went into the department, and the special advisers found that door. Everyone else had to go through the main office, but there was a door on the side, and they said, 'Is this the special advisers' door?' and the civil servants said, 'Yes'.

JG: Based on the breadth of your experience in government, how would you actually describe the main roles and duties of a minister?

AM: Well, it is to take effective command of the policy that has been agreed by the Cabinet, by the Prime Minister, and to deliver it. And it is not, for example, to replicate the work that officials do. There have been incidents where a secretary of state has said that they will review all contracts over a certain figure and the contracts won't go ahead until they've done it. That is a ludicrous position to be in, because of course that's what the Civil Service are there for. Your job is to lay down what policy they follow in respect of those contracts. You've got all these civil servants – with real expertise – to do that, and then to put the position to you, and then you agree or don't agree. But it's not to go through the fine print of a contract; that's for civil servants to do, not for a minister. So it's to run the department, run the policy, and never to expose a civil servant to public scrutiny, because if you do that then civil servants won't give

you their unfettered view. Ministers take the responsibility for the public-facing activity; it is to run the department and to implement the policy, and secure public support for it.

JG: And is there anyone you ever looked to as a good role model?

AM: Goodness. Yes, but for different reasons. Michael Heseltine was a very good role model. Norman Fowler, who of course memorably, brilliantly ran the Department of Health and Social Security for six years.

JG: And just thinking about the day-to-day reality of being a minister, how was most of your time actually spent?

AM: Well I used to get in before eight in the morning and I used to have meetings all day. I used to try not to take work home during the week. So I'd stay in the department until I'd finished. And that had the benefit of – civil servants had to stay in the department as well until I'd finished – and therefore that had the benefit of making them prioritise work instead of just lobbing it all into a red box, which can sometimes happens.

I used to get everything at the end of the week sent to me in my constituency and I am very proud of the fact that throughout my entire time as a minister, I never arrived back in the office on Monday morning with a backlog. I'd always cleared all the work so that boxes were full of work that was done, decisions were made. We started the new week with a clean sheet. The size of my private office nearly doubled as a result of the work that was going through it.

But I should explain that when I was a junior minister, I used rather to resent the red boxes coming up at the weekends. I had young children and I remember my elder daughter would count the number of red boxes delivered by the Royal Mail and she knew if there was one, I'd be out of action for half of a Saturday. If there were two or three it was a whole day. And if it was more than three, it could be the whole weekend. And I remember being woken up by her hitting me with a pillow saying, 'Daddy those boxes have all arrived and I'm not going to see you!' I used to sign a lot of letters because I looked after the Child Support Agency. I used to have six boxes most weekends. And I used to slightly resent that because social security and the Department for Work and Pensions, this is very detailed, tightly written policy stuff by and large, and you either grip it, or else you'd just be riding around in the car and signing the letters. If you want to take part in decision-making on issues of social security, then you have to grip the detail otherwise you're only surfing on top of it.

In development, it was completely different. I used to sit down with a box at 10 o'clock on a weekend evening and I used to suddenly look up and it'd be two o'clock in the morning, because the work was so interesting, so fascinating. One realised that Britain was making a real contribution to the world in terms of saving lives. Decisions that needed to be made and got right, which would have a dramatic effect on the lives of possibly hundreds of thousands of people. My children were older, so it didn't encroach as much. So I found that really satisfying.

JG: How did you balance the other competing demands on your time – your parliamentary role, the media, public advocacy?

AM: Well I was always very keen to do media work because I wanted to get across the message that international development was really important and hugely in the national interest. And I knew we needed to justify the fact that this department had a ring-fenced budget and there were many people who thought that charity begins at home. Of course it does, but it doesn't end there. And there was a strong case to be made to the public. So I had a very high priority for that and would take any opportunity to try and make the case to the public. And I can't judge whether I made it well or badly, but I always did my best to try and make it, to get across the argument. And Parliament on the whole was very supportive of development. There were a great many people in the House of Commons who knew a lot about it on both sides of the House. And so I was very keen to try and engage with Parliament, particularly the select committee – which of course was full of experts on it – as part of getting support for the case for development.

JG: And then obviously your constituency role as well...?

AM: Yes, absolutely. And I always used to try and remember that my first duty was to my constituents. And in fact throughout the time that I was in the Cabinet, the number of constituency events and engagements which I did in Royal Sutton Coldfield did not go down. It was the same when I was on the backbenches and when I was in the Cabinet. I always had my constituency as a top priority.

JG: And can you just talk us through an occasion where an unexpected event or even a crisis hit the department, and how you dealt with that?

AM: Well the Pakistan floods happened quite early on and I had decided that Britain should review the way we did emergency relief but we had not carried out that important review at that point. We decided that in opposition, and we got Lord Ashdown to chair the working group that addressed this and he did that with very great skill.

The Pakistan floods hit in the late summer of 2010. It was a catastrophe in Pakistan, with the livelihoods of many people destroyed. Many people were killed as well. So I came back early from holiday in Africa, where I was with my family celebrating my 25th wedding anniversary to lead the department's effort to help. I had to learn very fast how to make sure that the different parts of government that could help were pulled together, in the holiday season. That was quite a challenge and obviously I hadn't done it before. Secondly, there was no sort of manual on how to do these things. I had to make sure that other countries which could help in a variety of different ways were galvanised. And we did the best we could. Britain made a significant contribution. I remember heading from Pakistan direct to New York and the United Nations to berate the General Assembly for not doing more. I think following the reviews that took place afterwards, we would do better today than we did then. But we certainly were a world leader in terms of trying to help the poor people who were caught up in that dreadful disaster. And we must always be self-critical on these things and work out how we can do better in the future.

Tom Gash (TG): And did you find that issue about working across different departments something that you had difficulties with more generally across government?

AM: Well it was certainly true that DfID had stuck out like a bit of a sore thumb in government and had been quite difficult. The department had been set up by Clare Short, who although her politics was very different from mine, I freely admit was a very good development minister. It had been a bit of a 'Tony Blair's darling', the department, because he was so interested in aid and development. And so the department needed to be turned from this sort of, slightly difficult teenage child into a department of state for development in the developing world. And I think we did that.

I used occasionally to have the generals from MoD around for a working lunch. They'd never been in DfID before, so it was a new experience for them. They used to make jokes about tree-huggers and sandal-wearers and I used to say, 'Look, I've got sandals in the corner'; but there is a picture of Second Lieutenant Mitchell in his armoured car in the United Nations Forces in Cyprus.

The other thing is that on the first day in the department... William Hague said when he spoke to all the Foreign Office that the turf war between DfID and the Foreign Office was over; 'Andrew Mitchell and I have worked closely together for the last five years and we can speak each other's words'. And I said, 'In DfID, we are no longer going to stick out like a sore thumb; the turf war with the Foreign Office is over and William Hague is one of my closest friends in politics'. So that also helped to address those systemic issues which had existed in the past. One shouldn't overstate them, but they were real.

JG: And what do you feel was your greatest achievement in office?

AM: Oh goodness, that's not for me to judge. I prepared for a long time for it beforehand. I feel passionately about international development and about doing something to end these colossal discrepancies of opportunity and wealth, which exist in our world today and disfigure it. And goodness, we've seen with the growth of ISIL and this catastrophe in Syria and Iraq, and this belt of misery across

northern Africa, that that remains an urgent priority for the world. And with hindsight I should never have moved from DfID. But at least I had the chance for two and a half years to do the job of my dreams and to try and make changes that really matter.

JG: I just want to rephrase the question slightly in terms of what are you most proud of from your time at DfID.

AM: Well I decided that we should have an event once a year which would have a real impact on development around the world but would also show the British people why development really matters. And I persuaded the Prime Minister to do two of those; one in 2011 and one in 2012.

In 2011, we brought together development agencies, governments, private companies, and philanthropic foundations to London for a summit to pledge support for vaccinating children in the poor world as the replenishment of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation, GAVI. Britain put its money where its mouth was. And as a result, for the whole of the last Parliament, due to Britain's actions and at British taxpayers expense a child in the poor world was vaccinated every two seconds and the life of a child in the poor world was saved every two minutes from diseases that none of our children in Britain die from. But I'm not saying that was my achievement. I was the person at the crease who delivered that British policy

And the following year we did the same thing with family planning, galvanising efforts so that poor women around the world who wanted to decide for themselves whether and when they had children would be able to do so. And if everyone stands by those commitments that were made in 2012, by 2020 the number of poor women in the world today who want access to contraception and family planning but can't get it will have halved. So that would be another very important British policy priority where Britain has led which will have a dramatic effect on the levels of misery in the world. You can't understand development unless you see it through the eyes of a girl or a woman in the poor world; it's at the heart of everything we do in development.

JG: And what were the key factors... what needed to happen to get those events off the ground?

AM: Oh, it's about organisation. It's about relationships. It's about good civil servants working very hard to deliver it. And we had brilliant people in the department. I mean they knew I was very strongly behind it which gave them authority. The Government was very strongly behind it. And the result of all of that was that we were able to deliver. But we had good people who were natural leaders and natural organisers, good relationships that Britain has around the world in development. And delivery is the key in all these things, you know. You can have as many dry books on policy and stuff, but at the end of the day you've got to have the network and the wiring to deliver the result. Working with the Gates Foundation was also a stimulating and rewarding experience.

JG: And is there anything you found particularly frustrating about being a minister?

AM: Not really. Although that may have been because I'd done it before so I'd sort of realised what to expect. But I'm very conscious that I was extremely fortunate that I was... I had a series of views and policy priorities which completely reflected the Prime Minister's view. The Prime Minister was extremely interested in international development, very knowledgeable about it, and because I'd worked with him for five years on this, we could complete each other's sentences. And therefore I think he trusted my judgement on development and I sort of knew I had his support.

I regard myself as having been extremely fortunate that I was in a department doing a job where there was an absolute community of view, belief and interest with my boss.

TG: So what were your key relationships working across government?

AM: Oh, Defence and Foreign Office, particularly the Foreign Office, which was very easy because I'd worked so long with William Hague. But also in Defence, principally with Liam Fox, I found him very good to deal with. And also Climate Change and Energy, where there was a very good number two, Tory Greg Barker, and also Chris Huhne was Secretary of State and I found him to be a very sympathetic and good colleague. So those were the main departments.

JG: And do you have any observations on the coalition dynamic?

AM: I thought it worked extremely well, I thought that... I mean I personally had no problem with the Liberal Democrats and enjoyed working with them in Cabinet. Of course they were the Orange Book liberals. We worked really with the Orange Book liberals. But I found Chris Huhne every bit as easy to work with as I did my Conservative colleagues.

JG: And based on your experiences, how would you define an effective minister?

AM: In order to command the support of civil servants in your department, they need to know that you can get things done. That you can work the Whitehall machine and deliver results. That's extremely important. It's also a myth that you need civil servants to agree with you. In my experience, civil servants respond very well to a minister who knows their own mind and can get things done. I took over a Labour-created department and there was a possibility that the department could have reacted badly to the Tories coming in. When in government before, the Tories were not thought to have done well on international development; we had cut the budget significantly and so forth. And yet there have been some brilliant Conservative ministers: Lynda Chalker and Chris Patten who were my Conservative predecessors, who were both outstanding. But this was a new department set up by Labour, created very much in the image of Clare Short. And yet the civil servants in DfID responded magnificently. You know, some of them must have thought I was a crusty old Tory, but at least my heart was in the right place and I knew my stuff. And that was my experience; if civil servants thought you knew what you were doing, they would deliver for you. What they don't like is ministers who didn't really know what they wanted to do, hadn't got a clear view on policy, and just wanted to 'be a minister'.

JG: And what advice would you give to a minister entering government for the first time?

AM: Well I think it's quite a good idea to read Gerald Kaufman's book on how to be a minister for a bit of entertainment; take advice from predecessors; listen with care to civil servants, win their respect; and be very clear about what you want to achieve. If you want to be an effective minister, know what effective... know how you define 'effective.' You need to have a small number of clear objectives and pursue them.

TG: What distinction would you make between your experience of being a secretary of state and being a minister. Do they feel like very different jobs?

AM: They are completely different really; the trick about being a minister is to get some responsibility of your own. When I became a minister in Social Security, I identified an area which was the Child Support Agency that was extremely difficult, very fraught, and where there was so much detail that in the end the Secretary of State would not be able to micromanage it. So I found a niche for myself to deliver for my Secretary of State.

And when I was Secretary of State, I tried to give my two ministers – who were both extremely good – areas to get on with. One of them did disease, malaria, and health issues, particularly in Africa. And I would always know what they were doing, but I hope I recognised their ability to get on with it. And the other one was an expert on the Middle East, and on a number of conflict problems, so he got on with that. That worked well.

The route to enjoyment as a junior minister is to find an area where you can drive forward the policy and where you're not always having to report to the Secretary of State. As a Secretary of State it is to know what you can devolve and to keep your eye on what really matters. It is a very different job being secretary of state, a very different job.

JG: And the process of deciding those two areas that your junior ministers would concentrate on, was that based on areas that you felt you could devolve or their interests and skills?

AM: The thing is to know what they are good at and let them get on with it and actually encourage them.

My father was a minister and he once told me that the best minister he'd ever worked for was Nick Ridley [Transport Secretary in the 80s]. Why? Because Nick Ridley was a superb boss. When there were difficulties to be faced in the House of Commons, Nick Ridley always did the statement himself. And when there was a really easy piece of good news to be announced, he gave it to his junior ministers to do. That is a hell of an accolade.

JG: And with hindsight, would you have approached the role differently in any way?

AM: No. With hindsight, I realise my good fortune at having done it for five years in opposition. I managed to raise the funding so I could travel extensively. I visited more than 40 countries in those five years, looking at different aspects in each country of poverty and development. So, for example, I went to Mali to look at how the cotton growers there... this is one of the poorest countries in the world, but it has got cotton. But it couldn't sell its cotton for a living wage because of the protectionist policies of the United States of America. So I went there to look and see for myself how you'd do something about that. I went to Uganda to look at how the fight against HIV/AIDS could be taken forward. I went to Rwanda to see how a country that has been mired in conflict could ever possibly recover from such ghastly circumstances. I went to South Africa to see how we should develop a long-standing policy there. Bangladesh to see how deep and internal conflict issues of corruption can be addressed as well as the dire effects of climate change. I went to the DRC [Democratic Republic of the Congo] to see how on earth you help people develop effectively when their society is run by kleptomaniacs.

So all different visits to develop a policy which then turned into a green paper which I got through the Shadow Cabinet and having very good support staff both in opposition and in government. And I was going into a department full of very dedicated and very skilled people.

TG: So what were your best sources of advice and insight once you were actually in the secretary of state role? Did you still do the visits to the ground and speak to people on the ground?

AM: Yes – all the time, I basically travelled every other week

TG: What did you find the most useful thing when you were trying to form your ideas and to get things done?

AM: I knew what we wanted to do, so I needed to check that our plans were being implemented. And I had a clear idea about the importance of results. Because you see the development industry had a habit of saying to people, 'Listen sonny, we're doing God's work, so give us the money and trust us'. And I needed to explain to them that wouldn't work anymore, particularly with a much greater British taxpayer commitment to this.

And actually we're very good at development in Britain, we do it very well, and so what we need to do is to be much more open. So we had a policy of transparency where we put all expenditure onto the internet in a usable way. And because we're good, you take the plaudits when they come, but if you get something wrong, put your hands up and put it right. And I thought the sector needed to be much more open. I set up the watchdog, the Independent Commission on Aid Impact, the ICAI, and lots of people in the development sector said, 'You don't really want to do this Secretary of State, you're putting

judgement into the hands of bean counters' – I remember someone saying. But they're wrong because at the end of the day we need to hold ourselves to account. Ministers can just sweep inconvenient truths under the carpet. But we set up this Commission to report not to ministers but to the legislature, to the International Development Select Committee, not to the executive. And the ICAI could be very testing and very difficult, but they did a good job, a very important job, and you need to do that to justify this taxpayer support.

JG: And that impulse to improve transparency, was that something you came into office with or that you found was necessary after being on the ground?

AM: Yes. We came into office with it. We introduced a transparency guarantee and were the first department in Whitehall to do. I think we had 112 to-dos/changes to make, and in the two and a half years I was there we delivered over a hundred of them. One of the ones we didn't deliver was to change the WTO [World Trade Organisation], but to do that is quite a big ask! So we did our best, we didn't succeed but we made a tiny bit of progress on that.

So we had a very clear list of things to do. One or two of them, the civil servants, said, 'Look, there's a better way of doing this; in opposition you haven't sort of realised, but we can now tell you that there is another way of achieving this result you want, and it's not the way you've designed'. And we'd listen. And on a couple of them they were absolutely right, absolutely right, and we listened to civil servants and we re-engineered it with their help. And we were able to deliver a better result because of that.

TG: Obviously DfID works through contractors quite a lot.

AM: Yes, I mean there's a view about DfID which is sometimes held by the military and by some Tory backbenchers who believe that DfID sits around swimming pools drinking in warzones when they should be digging trenches wearing fatigues up at the front. But DfID is a policy body. DfID is full of brilliant people who craft policy and operate through third parties. And that is a misunderstanding about DfID. And we let contracts following strict competition rules.

TG: My question was really how did you... did you change the way you operated with contractors? Did it feature in the way you were running the department? Did you think about contracting with those people differently?

AM: Yes. The answer was that we wanted to achieve things, and therefore achieve them in the most cost effective way you can. And one of the things that we did was we said, 'Under Labour in the past, people around the world doing things in development have each year bid for an increase in their budget and everyone gets an extra 3%'. I said, 'We're not going to do it like that, we're going to buy results; we're going to have a bilateral aid review, and a multilateral aid review, and we're going to buy results'.

So that was the key word for the first 18 months. Long, long hours doing this, cutting the programme from 43 countries to 26 bilateral aid programmes. And in the multilateral sector assessing each agency – first time some of the multilateral agencies had ever been reviewed since they were set up after the war – and looking at what they had achieved and putting all the evaluation in the public domain.

And so in the end we said, 'Instead of you in Ethiopia, putting in for a budget increase of 3% and getting it, we're going to ask what you can produce. And so you say to us, well we can get 50,000 girls into school in Ethiopia, and we say, "Fine, what's it going to cost?"' And so we created an internal market where the Ethiopian office might call the Rwandan office and say for example, 'How is it that you can get girls into school for £40 a year and we can't get it below £60?' We created an internal market in results, and 'results, results, results'. That was my mantra. And actually it's been copied all around the world; the EU programme now do it, the Americans do it, the Australians do it, and it was a British initiative. Results, you buy results.

And I remember sitting in my home in London one Sunday night listening to a piece of music with tears pouring down my face as I made decisions between educating girls in one country as opposed to another. And similarly to prioritise getting clean water in one country where dirty water and water borne

diseases kill thousands of children every day rather than in another country because the cost-benefit equation simply could not be justified. That we would try and make a real impact here rather than there, because that's where we would secure the best results from the policies that we implemented. And of course we had the ICAI, the independent Commission to check that these results were really being delivered. So that was a very different way of doing things.

JG: Another slightly unusual thing about DfID is how geographically spread staff are across the UK – there's a huge policy function in Scotland. What was your experience of having that spread? How you think it worked?

AM: East Kilbride, yes we moved some very high quality jobs to East Kilbride. And the way I liked to see it was as a sort of office round the corner. So although it was physically a long way away, I used to go there and so did the other ministers to make them feel a core part of the team as indeed they definitely were. But they were very high quality jobs. It wasn't just a back office, which was how it was originally commissioned I think by Judith Hart back in the '60s when East Kilbride opened.

Going back to your point, I used to travel every fortnight. But I would travel to check that these changes were being made, and I would be very clear on the ground, it wasn't a schmoozing effort, although I always was keen to encourage people. But it was very much, 'Have you got it? Have you got the new approach? Are you delivering on the new approach?'

What I wanted to say to them was, 'We will go through this and I will ask you the questions that Mrs Jones, my constituent, would ask', because at the end of the day we have to explain what we are doing in development to Mrs Jones, and we have to get Mrs Jones' support because it's Mrs Jones' money that is being spent on this', and 'Mrs Jones' became a bit of a joke in the department; 'Will this get past Mrs Jones, the Secretary of State's constituent in Royal Sutton Coldfield?' And I had some quite difficult meetings overseas as well, where I thought that perhaps there was a bit of resistance to some of these changes, and people have their own passions and priorities, which they wanted to deliver. But this is taxpayer's money, and it has to be used to the very best effect in delivering on the elected government's objectives.

TG: Are there ways in which government, the whole government machine that you talked about earlier, functions that you think could be changed and improved to help it achieve more, generally?

AM: I think that during the Blair era things went slightly wrong in relationships between ministers and civil servants, not necessarily for malign reasons. I think what happened is this chumminess in Blair's time was translated actually into an overfamiliar relationship where civil servants moved from their traditional to one of more familiar closeness. And therefore, seeing this happen, civil servants developed structures to prevent themselves being put in a bad place. And I was very struck when I came back into government from having been in government before in the 1990s that a lot of these systems designed to protect civil servants from that were now in place. Now in my case, they honestly didn't need to be because I always respected the conventions. That they were not my friends and that they were not my subordinates either, because they worked for the Civil Service, and that there's a proper relationship to be had with them but I never heard the words that all secretaries of state live in fear of, from their Permanent Secretary, the accounting officer: 'I will require a written instruction to do that, Secretary of State'.

TG: Were there any other sort of protections that you'd noticed that had been introduced?

AM: It was just, there were times when getting something done was like wading through treacle. There were times like that.

TG: In relation to anything specifically?

AM: I don't think I would be wanting to go into that, because sometimes... I mean there was also the great joy, you know, the DfID Secretary sits on the National Security Council, which is an incredibly important change in the machinery of government and possibly one of the most important changes we've made.

On the whole, changing the architecture of government, the geometry of government is a mistake. It leads to endless upheaval, paralysis in delivery while it's going on, and quite often it's changed back a few years later. The National Security Council is a brilliant innovation and has not received the credit it deserves, for the way we did the National Security and Defence Review in 2010, which was a real change and was an effective review. And it's been poo-pooed by soi-disant experts – unfairly in my opinion.

TG: It's interesting you're mentioning... There's two things that have come out at the end that have come out very strongly from two pieces of Institute research. One of these is the strength of the NSC model, which we did a case study on. And the other is the sort of difficulty of actually making structural reforms that don't do any good at all or endure beyond about a two or three year time horizon. So I think that's definitely something that comes out very strongly in the work we do.

JG: Is there anything we haven't asked you that you would particularly like to add?

AM: Well one of the things we got wrong was when we were in opposition we were very much opposed to the special adviser system. We thought it was politicising the Civil Service. I'm absolutely against politicising the Civil Service, but I am very much in favour of the special adviser system.

I had two extremely effective ones. They were good because they'd worked for me in opposition and knew precisely what we wanted to do. And therefore the civil servants trusted them to give a good steer, and the civil servants would go to them saying, 'We're working this up, what will he say? Will he understand this? Will he think this works?' And they could tell civil servants the answer. And they would get it right and the civil servants knew they would get it right. So they were useful and also respectful to the civil servants and they didn't try to boss them around.

And I heard that under my predecessor who had on one occasion gone away, civil servants had arrived in his office one morning and rather to their surprise were told by the special adviser that in the absence of the Secretary of State he was in charge! Such instances cause trouble and undermine the system.

TG: But some of your colleagues won't have had the same luxury of preparation for their briefs, particularly of course when the coalition arrived and many people had to be shifted around to accommodate Lib Dem ministers as well.

AM: Yes. I was extremely fortunate.

TG: And how do you think it affected colleagues – we will find this out of course –but did they have a very different experience, you think, arriving with almost a completely new brief?

AM: I was very lucky because I had the brief that I had done in opposition and also as I sat around the Cabinet table seeing colleagues sort of cauterised by the cuts they had to make, I had a rising budget. And I used to tiptoe out of Cabinet sometimes and make my escape as fast as I could, because I felt that I wasn't sharing their pain and that I wasn't a good colleague in that sense.

Now, the answer to your question is what do you do if you're suddenly asked to go and be the Secretary of State for something you know nothing about? The answer is that secretaries of state are not normally expected to know all the answers. In my case, because I'd done it for so long, I was fortunate and knew the policy pretty well. Remember that as a minister, your job is to serve your government, your country, and your party. Expert civil servants put up advice and your job is to make the necessary judgement on the basis of the advice that you are getting. But if I was asked to go to a department that I knew nothing

about, I would read the briefs and try and add the political judgement to make the right decision. It is quite possible to do what you've just described, which is to be shuttled around and moved to somewhere you know nothing about, but to bring ministerial judgement to bear and try and get it right.

TG: Do you think the background that ministers have prior to coming into government, matters?

AM: Yes, I do. And I'm a great critic of the 'professional politician'. These people who leave university go off and become research assistants, then become special advisers, then Members of Parliament because they know the right words to use before the selection committee, and then wander around the House of Commons wondering why they're not in the Cabinet. That is not a good grounding for being a minister, although you know the system inside out.

Now in every generation there are people who do have that background, who become brilliant politicians. There is Rab Butler, Chris Patton, Michael Portillo, George Osborne. There are a few of them, and there should always be a few of them, but it shouldn't be the vast mass. And what you want is people who have been in business, been in the trades unions, been a doctor, been a soldier. You want government to be made up of people who've been involved in all walks of life. The House of Commons is a the national assembly which represents all parts of society, and not just the political establishments. Part of the reason why the public are sceptical about politicians is because so many of them have not done a day's work in the real world.

In America you've got people moving from business into politics; very difficult to do that in Britain. And although ministers should always come out of Parliament, or mainly out of the House of Commons and that's a strength of the system; we shouldn't forget the importance of outside careers in making up the body politic.

TG: Is there any additional support you think ministers need to do their jobs effectively?

AM: No. What yet another tier of bureaucracy? No, no.

TG: I was almost thinking actually the support around learning, professional development or anything like that. Or do you not think that...

AM: That's what opposition is for.

JG: One of the things that you hear many people comment on about DfID over the last five years or so is that you've now got a lot more specialists working in the organisation. I don't know if that's something you'd agree with. If so, was that a deliberate part of the recruitment practices around the organisation changing?

AM: It was absolutely deliberate. When I used to go round in opposition, I used to say to the civil servants, 'Are you a civil servant or are you a development expert?' And a lot of them used to say that they were development experts. And then word went round that this shadow secretary, this crusty old Tory, is asking and they then started... I used to get these brilliant responses, which didn't answer the question. So word had clearly gone round the department!

And the truth is that DfID needed an injection of business skills and conflict resolution skills among others. A little less development DNA and a little more British Civil Service DNA. I think on the Civil Service form now it says don't put down DfID because you won't get in. So they go to another department first and then try and transfer across to DfID. But what you need is to take these brilliant young people who are passionate about development, bring that passion in, but also make them realise that they are part of the British Civil Service delivering British government objectives and not a well-upholstered NGO doing good things in the developing world.

JG: One final question, were there any other parts of your strategy of turning DfID into a department of state aside from obviously the personnel that's employed within it?

AM: Personnel wise we needed to hire far more people from the private sector. And we needed to put all our private sector assets into one department – the private sector department, which I set up. All our private sector facing assets were in this department. We needed better relations with other departments around Whitehall. A whole series of other measures were set out in our Green paper and I think we achieved over a 100 of them. All of those improved DfID's role in my view.

CDC [Commonwealth Development Corporation] needed complete reform as it had lost its way. The Civil Service were nervous of CDC, they didn't really understand it. The special advisers weren't versed enough in the way it worked so I secured the help and assistance of a City expert to help craft the new CDC. We worked out what to do and we radically reformed it.

And in 50 years' time, the symbol of British government development work won't be the Department for International Development, it will be CDC – which is the private sector investment vehicle for pioneer and patient capital – which helps grow prosperity and shows the magic of the private sector in some very difficult parts of the world. There's another point by the way which relates to one of your earlier questions if I may just go back...

JG: Sure. Absolutely.

AM: ...which is that you asked about mechanisms. We set up challenge funds, which had not been used extensively before. For example, we set up the Girls' Education Challenge Fund. A key way in which you change the world is by educating girls. There's lots of different ways you can change the world, but for me that's probably the most important. Why? Because if you educate a girl, she will get married later, she will have less children, she will educate her own children, she will carry authority in her family, her village and as we've seen in Afghanistan, get elected in local and regional and national government.

So educating girls is the key. So we set up the Girls' Education Challenge Fund, designed to get a million girls into school in some of the most difficult places in the world, where the state sector didn't exist. And you would get the private sector, philanthropic organisations, faith groups bidding into that fund and saying, 'If you give us some money we will get 'x' girls into school in Ethiopia or wherever.

So the challenge fund principle for development and of course this is exactly the way it should work because then you've got third parties contracted by DfID who've been evaluated by our brilliant policy people. They are found to be able to deliver and away they go. And one of the best examples of that is CAMFED [Campaign for Female Education], which is Cambridge-based... sort of Cambridge's answer to Oxfam. CAMFED specialises in getting girls into school and is doing absolutely brilliant work, brilliant work, backed by the Department, backed by the Challenge Fund backed by the British taxpayers.

Citations

This archive is an open resource and we encourage you to quote from it. Please ensure that you cite the Institute for Government correctly:

- In publications (e.g. academic articles, research or policy papers) you can footnote or endnote the interview you are quoting from as follows:

Transcript, [Name of Interviewee], [Date of Interview], Ministers Reflect Archive, Institute for Government, Online: [Web Address of Transcript], Accessed: [Download Date].

For example: Transcript, George Young, 21 July 2015, Ministers Reflect Archive, Institute for Government, Online: <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/person/george-young> . Accessed: 15 December 2015

- On social media, please hyperlink to the site: www.instituteforgovernment.co.uk/ministers-reflect You can also use #ministersreflect and mention us @instituteforgov if you are quoting from the archive on Twitter.
- Journalists wishing to quote from the archive are free to do so, but we do ask that you mention the Institute for Government as a source and link to the archive in online articles. Please direct any media enquiries to nicole.valentinuzzi@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

The Institute for Government is here to act as a catalyst for better government.

The Institute is an independent charity founded in 2008 to help make government more effective.

- We carry out research, look into the big governance challenges of the day and find ways to help government improve, rethink and sometimes see things differently.
- We offer unique insights and advice from experienced people who know what it's like to be inside government both in the UK and overseas.
- We provide inspirational learning and development for senior policy makers.

We do this through seminars, workshops, talks or interesting connections that invigorate and provide fresh ideas.

We are well placed for senior members of all parties and the Civil Service to discuss the challenges of making government work; and to seek and exchange practical insights from the leading thinkers, practitioners, public servants, academics and opinion-formers.

Copies of all the interviews undertaken as part of this project are available at:

www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect

© Institute for Government 2015

2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7747 0400

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

Email: enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk

@instituteforgov

The Institute is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England No. 6480524
Registered Charity No. 1123926