

# Ministers reflect

Hugh Robertson



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# Hugh Robertson

## Biographical details

## Electoral History

2001-2015: Member of Parliament for Faversham and Mid Kent

## Parliamentary career

2013-2014: Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

2012-2013: Minister of State for Sport and Tourism

2010-2012: Minister for Sport and the Olympics (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State)

2005-2010: Shadow Minister for Sports and Olympics

*Hugh Robertson was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Tom Gash on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project*

**Nicola Hughes (NH): Thinking about when you first started as a Minister at DCMS [Department for Culture, Media and Sport], what was your experience of coming into government like?**

**Hugh Robertson (HR):** It was very confusing, is the obvious answer to that. When I was appointed in 2010, there were two jobs I had to do: the first and most important was to be the Minister with the day-to-day responsibility for running London 2012, and the second was to be the Sports Minister. And unlike many people who followed me in that job subsequently who ended up doing tourism and gambling and all sorts of other things, there were just those two things to do. So that allowed me to focus on that very, very precisely.

There were three things that were particularly confusing: one was doing something for the first time when you knew nothing about it; two, we were doing it in a coalition which was entirely new ground; and three, we had to take some enormously complicated and difficult decisions. As an example, my very first afternoon in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, we all went into the Secretary of State's office where the Civil Service had prepared all the... I think there were about 40 projects from memory, that were due to be funded over the next three or four years. We had to go through them all with a red pen, one by one, and we knew we could keep about five. Now there were some quite high profile – well they were all high profile to the people who were affected by them – but there were things like the new Stonehenge visitor centre, new wings on museums and galleries, big sports participation schemes that were there as part of London 2012. The presumption was they were going to go, unless you had an extraordinarily good argument for keeping them. And there's nothing you can do about this, but what really struck me about it was the sheer dishonesty of the election campaign that we just fought. Because an awful lot of people who – I don't want to go into party-political finger-pointing – who'd gone into that election campaign, must have known that there was this huge rack of human misery sitting behind it all, and we'd never discussed this at all in the previous month.

**NH: You mentioned doing this quite unusual role for the first time, what sort of support was available to you?**

**HR:** Downing Street was trying to clamp down on the number of special advisers. So the Secretary of State had two, but they tend traditionally to look after the Secretary of State; they'll do what they can for junior ministers but they're really there to look after their boss. So as a new minister at my level, you were entirely reliant on the Civil Service support. And they were a bit unsure to be honest, because you've got a new minister and you don't know what that's going to be like – they weren't allowed to meet me or get to know me. I'd never had a session with them. The first time I set eyes on the people who were going to be working closely with me and running my life on a day-to-day basis was when I walked through the door. I hadn't been allowed to come down for a sort of early, 'just-in-case' introductory meeting before the election. Nobody knew on day one whether the Olympic budget itself was going to survive the first in-year cuts. So there was a huge amount of uncertainty about that. And like us, they didn't know how we were going to deal with the coalition. So there was huge uncertainty for everybody.

**NH: And thinking back to previous roles that you'd done – I know you'd shadowed the brief – how did they prepare you?**

**HR:** The Olympics is probably a test case in how you ought to do these things. For the period running to the election, we had done everything on a cross-party political basis, so the Government Olympic Executive had come to see me every quarter and given me total visibility over the budget. And also I had had regular quarterly meetings with Seb Coe, Paul Deighton, John Armitt, and David Higgins who were running the Olympic Delivery Authority.

The Olympic Delivery Authority [ODA] was the organisation that built it. You then had the organising committee that ran it and there was then a legacy body that tried to make sense of what happened

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afterwards. The ODA was headed by John Armitt, with Higgins as the Chief Executive, and then you had Coe and Deighton in the Organising Committee and Margaret Ford running the legacy board. I'd had access to all those people beforehand, and had done the brief in opposition, so was genuinely able to hit the ground running. There were one or two things I had to work out but it wasn't like having to spend six months getting my head around it. Two of the great things that government could learn out of that whole process: our leaders of the opposition need to put people into jobs that they then carry on to do in government if they win an election, and, having more confidence about giving the Opposition visibility over things leads to much better government in the end.

When I was a Foreign Office minister and we had awkward issues, I always used to say, 'Why don't I just ring up the constituency MP or the Shadow Minister and I'll just talk to them?' And I always used to say, 'We've got a whole series of information, some of which we can't reveal publicly, but I'm happy to give it to you, so you understand why we've done what we've done, if you want to be in that position. But then you can't stand up publicly and slate us'. And on a couple of occasions, people took that offer up, but on one the MP said, 'No, I'm very closely involved with the family, they expect me to represent them, I think it probably is better that I don't'. But at least you have an adult conversation with people.

**NH: Was there anyone, any other ministers that you saw as good role models?**

**HR:** If I say not particularly, that sounds rather negative. But then we were all quite new to it in 2010 – remember that the Conservative party had been out of power since 1997, so 13 years – so there weren't that many people around who had been ministers before, so we were all quite new to it. And the Olympics were such a special project that the sort of people that I looked to didn't really come from inside politics.

**NH: Based on your experience, how would you describe the main roles and duties of a minister?**

**HR:** That's a good question and it sounds a rather trite answer. If you asked me what was my main priority in 2010, it was to deliver the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. It was as simple or as complicated as that. But actually my advice to anybody else trying to do it now across any brief is to be absolutely clear about what you're trying to achieve. When I was in the Army, straight after university, one of the techniques they used to teach you was to have a clear and simple aim, but actually trying to reduce this to what you really need to do, that one clear and simple aim, is one of the ways in which you can really achieve success. And it worked really well with sport because in the run up to the Olympic Games, we were very, very clear that the only question that was worth asking was, 'Is it going to win us more gold medals?' And actually we were very, very clear and focused about GB getting as far up in the medal stakes. At that point it was very easy, and it was much easier to deal with the high performance sport organisation, UK Sport, whose role was to win the maximum number of gold medals at an Olympic arena than it was to deal with the participation side. We had this slightly woollier 'get more people playing sport' thing, and it was much more difficult. But actually if you can reduce it to a very clear and simple aim, it does make life easier.

**NH: If I could just push you on that a bit. When you did the Olympics brief, that goal was set out quite clearly; when you then moved departments, how did you go about establishing what the priority would be in the FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office]?**

**HR:** There are a whole collection of people round the Olympics who I considered myself very, very lucky to work with: Armitt and Higgins, Coe and Deighton are four obvious ones. William [Hague] was a fantastic Secretary of State to work for because he's very, very clear about setting aims and objectives. So when I arrived in the Foreign Office, we talked about the three big ticket issues, which were at that stage the war in Syria, the Iran nuclear negotiations, and the Middle East peace process. And he said, 'I want you to be across Syria and Iran, but I will lead on Syria and Iran and that will come to me first. On the other hand I don't have the time to cover the Middle East peace process, so I want you to immerse yourself in the detail of that'. So in a sense I knew when I walked out of there that I had to listen to the briefings and read up on Syria and Iran, but actually the thing I had to take home and really study was the Middle East peace process.

**NH: Okay, thinking now about the day-to-day reality of being a minister. How did you spend most of your time?**

**HR:** Different in the two jobs, really different in the two jobs. Let me do the easier one first; in the Foreign Office, the Foreign Secretary's instructions were very simple. One had to be out of the country visiting, out visiting and doing things, three weeks in every four. And then on the fourth week you were duty minister, and so everything landed on your desk. So that in a sense was very easy.

More difficult in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. I tried to bring a bit of structure to the day – because I have that sort of mind – by leaving the first half an hour of the day, if I could, for my private staff and anything that needed doing. I then used to try and make sure that every single day I had one hour for any civil servant who wanted to come and see me about an issue, because permanently with the Olympics there were things that needed signing off. Everything, I think, that was over half a million pounds – I don't remember if it was half a million or a hundred thousand now – I think everything over half a million had to be signed off by me, and I think they generally tended to consult me on much over £100,000. So there was a constant stream of this stuff coming through. So trying to leave an hour free in the diary every day for people to come – so just book in with private office and come in for ten minutes.

I then made them keep two hours free for what became known as 'box time'. That wasn't purely because I was idle and didn't want to do it in the evenings; there was an awful lot of evening work that went on, many dinners that had to be attended. I'm also an evening traveller. If I've got to be somewhere at 8 o'clock the next morning I'd rather not get up at five, I'd rather get there the night before so you don't have to panic at Kings Cross Station. So unless I was going to do it between 11 o'clock at night and one in the morning, there wasn't going to be a lot of time to do box work at night. So I tried to do that during the day. We all went out on regional tours so visiting every region – going out to look at a sports event or cultural event, something connected to London 2012. And over that final year, I made it my job to visit every single GB squad personally, so not just going to watch them compete in the Visa World Cup or whatever it was but actually go and see them in training and have a couple of hours with them all and their performance directors just to sort of get a feeling for it.

**NH: And then also Parliamentary time; did you spend much time in Parliament and on the political side of the job?**

**HR:** It's a very good question, and one of the things that the Civil Service, bizarrely, doesn't do terribly well is Parliament. It doesn't understand it, and it doesn't understand the importance of a three-line whip, and actually, I sometimes thought if the Department for Culture, Media and Sport didn't get it, the Foreign Office was worse. They just about understand there's a Foreign Affairs Select Committee but they don't get urgent questions or anything like that.

I spent quite a lot of time both when I was a Minister, and then afterwards, going back to the teachings they do for young diplomats to try and tell them more about the fact that when you're at the dispatch box answering questions, it's pointless having the key bit of information twenty pages behind the binder because you just don't have the time. They can't just give you everything. They've got to sit down and analyse what's most likely to come up and produce you three bullet points and then a safe line of defence because that's all the time you've got.

**Tom Gash (TG): What about the constituency role?**

**HR:** I tried whenever possible to keep Friday for the constituency, including Friday night, but then I knew that come Saturday morning I'd be off on my travels again – because there's a lot of sport and stuff that happens on a Saturday. I used to try and keep Sunday free for the family. Didn't always work, needless to say, but that was the aim.

In the Foreign Office, I did the same thing. I said, 'If you need to get me somewhere, you can have me on Sunday night, but the presumption should be first thing on Monday morning I fly'. Actually works quite well with the Middle East – you're back again at tea time on Thursday, because that's the start of the

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weekend. So I would generally get back 10, 11 o'clock on a Thursday night. Friday I'm in my constituency.

**TG: Did you ever come under a lot of pressure to change the way you were managing your time?**

**HR:** Yes, but I resisted it. By the time I'd been doing it two or three months, nobody ever raised it again. No ambassador ever said to me, 'It's a shame we didn't have you here on Sunday' or anything else like that. You just have to be very clear about what you want, and then the system's flexible enough to adjust. I'm just one of those people who runs my life that way. It sort of works for me.

**TG: So what was the most surprising thing about coming into the ministerial role initially at DCMS?**

**HR:** Austerity and the impact of the cuts. There was an awful moment early on when the Secretary of State, Jeremy Hunt, addressed the civil servants, and he was very open and honest, rightly so, about austerity and the cuts that were going to need to be made to the department. Somebody in the front row said, 'Is there anybody who has any questions?' And somebody in the front row said, 'So you just told us that 50% of us or whatever will lose our jobs?' And Jeremy swallowed and said, 'Yes', and you could have heard a pin drop. Walking around the place was not easy to be honest. I think that the environment we'd come into was more difficult than the job that we were trying to do.

And I probably ought to add, I'm not saying by saying that that they were in any way unprofessional about it or gave us poor advice or anything else like that, but you know, in a perfectly understandable human way, they thought 'these people are going to make large numbers of us redundant'. It was very tricky.

**NH: What about times where something unexpected happened, so a crisis had hit the department. How did you deal with that? Could you talk us through an example maybe? An unexpected event?**

**HR:** You just have to deal with it. A day's quite a long time in politics. You can get up in the morning and you simply don't know very often what you could be doing by 10 o'clock.

One of the great things about having time in your diary, about not filling the day absolutely from morning till evening is that you have more flexibility. What most often happens is when one of these crises occurs, the problem is not solving the crisis but explaining the crisis to the outside world. I mean the decision is often reasonably easy to make, but then there's a two-hour media round that follows to try and sort the thing out, and that's where having the daily window in your diary is very, very important.

Another minister I know was one of those people who felt they should try and see everybody and fit as many people in. He used to pack his diary from nine o'clock in the morning till six. By the time I took over from him, yes he had a reputation as a minister who always listened, but he also had a reputation as someone who was forever cancelling meetings, and I think if you stack your diary right up, then you have no flexibility to deal with all the fast balls that inevitably come along.

**NH: And what approach did you take to making decisions? So an official's come to you with a policy question, or you've got to set the direction of something; how did you actually go about the decision making process?**

**HR:** The first thing is you need good political antennae as a minister because the first thing to work out is whether it really is your decision to make, or whether this is one where you're going to need to consult the secretary of state, or indeed whether Downing Street are going to have an interest in it. So understanding the parameters of what you're trying to do is important. The quality of advice I had, both from the Foreign Office and from the Government Olympic Executive, was very, very good from civil servants. And the Foreign Office is quite good at the policy desk producing one thing, and then they'll

say, 'Well the Human Rights department have a different view'. Obviously I would say, 'Well, get them down!' And so you could have the debate in front of you and then come down one way or another. Government Olympic Executive likewise is quite good at balancing all these decisions. Generally speaking you do have to ask yourself what you're not being told as much as what you are being told.

**NH: What did you think was your greatest achievement?**

**HR:** Delivering the London 2012. Actually, playing a part in delivering London 2012, I wasn't the only person who did it.

**TG: Is there anything in particular within that that you think are particular achievements?**

**HR:** We worked it, very, very sensibly. Part of the reason that it did work politically was firstly that we did it on a cross-party basis, so we probably spent less time worrying about what the Labour Party was going to say than might be the case with other policy areas and, secondly, Jeremy Hunt, who deserves enormous credit for this, was very, very clear about who did what, and that's a huge learning for a department.

William Hague was, likewise, brilliant at this in the Foreign Office. I can remember talking to him about things, talking through an issue, and he'd say when we'd got to the end of it, and once he'd ordered the issues brilliantly, 'So you might think of doing this, but it's your decision and I'll back whichever way you want to go'.

Jeremy over the Olympics was very, very clear that his role was to pull government together, all these different departments all of whom had different roles; his job was to pull them together and then he left me to deal with running the thing downwards – so dealing with the ODA on a day-to-day basis, dealing with the Organising Committee, dealing with the legacy bodies, dealing with the sport day-to-day fell to me. I knew instinctively what things were mine to decide and clearly if something had big-ticket importance I'd check it through with him as well. We had offices next door to each other so we could therefore talk to each other easily.

**NH: Just on your relationship with the Secretary of State more generally - how did you work, how did you stay in touch?**

**HR:** I was very lucky actually, because I had three very different ones, but three very good ones. Jeremy said early on, 'As a secretary of state, I'm going to achieve the following things', 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and then set up, very effectively actually, weekly or fortnightly meetings in each of those key secretary of state areas so that he could drive the project along. And he, very sensibly, over the Olympics, had a weekly meeting, and had a risk cloud where all the big issues that were likely to derail the project were graded and had different font sizes. So you knew the likely impact and likely severity of things. And we used to start every meeting by going through the risk cloud to make sure that all these things were covered off. It was a pretty effective way of managing it, but we then knew that all the other things that fell outside those key priorities were down to us.

When Maria Miller arrived in 2012, and Jeremy was moved off to the Department of Health, she was in the unusual position of arriving as a new Secretary of State into a new subject area with me fresh out of the Olympics, and Ed Vaizey who had also been doing it for two and a half years. So she had two junior ministers who probably knew more about it than she did. She very sensibly said, 'The door is always open'. And we used to have very, very regular meetings and kept a constant conversation going. The moment things go wrong between Secretaries of State and junior ministers – you get tensions in the ministerial team, sometimes you get them over policy, but more often you get them over process actually – is when the two sides stop talking to each other. Generally, the Coalition – Conservatives and Lib Dems – actually worked extraordinarily well, but the disasters normally occurred when people didn't talk to each other and briefed it all out into the press.

**NH: I mean you mentioned special advisers earlier; how did you work with Jeremy's special advisers?**

**HR:** As a junior minister you want to have a very good relationship with all the special advisers and I never fell out with one in nearly five years of doing it. But you do have to remember they are there to look after the secretary of state's interest, and they see themselves in that role. So their interests do not always align exactly with yours as a junior minister. Therefore you need to see them regularly, talk to them, make sure you know what they're trying to do, and have a drink with them every so often.

**TG: You worked with a lot of arms-length bodies of course in DCMS. How did you manage some of those relationships?**

**HR:** By regular contact. I used to make a point of seeing the chairs and chief executives of those organisations regularly. So during the Olympics, I co-ordinated the Government Olympic Executive, but with the sports bodies, I used make sure that I saw the chairs and chief executives of all those arms-lengths bodies every month. We really tried not to cancel it; I mean we did put it back in the diary but really worked hard at just keeping them in.

**TG: And did you ever find any of those classic tensions around autonomy of those organisations to do some of their functions?**

**HR:** Yes. Those stresses and strains are always there, but actually that's the reason why you need to talk to them. I think it was quite a shock to find that they had to come and see us that regularly. But once you've established trust with them, then you have a much more able relationship as a result.

**TG: And then what about working when you've got this dispersed international network of relationships?**

**HR:** In the Foreign Office?

**TG: In the Foreign Office.**

**HR:** You have a relationship that works as a Foreign Office minister on two levels: you've got the Foreign Office diplomatic network – ambassador-in-post and all the rest of it, and then you have the personal relationships that you yourself forge with your opposite numbers around the world. The Arab world, that I dealt with, is mad about texting. So quite a lot of them still text me fairly regularly, and actually when you've got to know them, they're very good and you form very close relationships with a lot of them.

**NH: One more on the different relationships you have in office. You talked a bit about the relationship with the Secretary of State; what about the ministerial team and other junior ministers?**

**HR:** I was very lucky. The Foreign Office is easy because you all do a different part of the world. You're not often around as a team.

DCMS is small. I can't start to explain the contrast between being a Minister of State at DCMS and being a Minister of State at the Foreign Office. At the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, everybody knows everybody else. The directors and the ministers are quite close; the ministers are very, very close. You see each other the whole time. We all had offices in a row, so we always used to walk past, stick our head round each other's doors. The Permanent Secretary at the time, Jonathan Stephens, if he hadn't seen me for a couple of days just used to put his head round the door.

You then get to the Foreign Office which is this massive, rather grand monolith. The ministers are never, ever there together. The whole thing is much more structured and old-fashioned. You know the civil servants call you ‘Minister’ or ‘Sir’, the Permanent Secretary, the Permanent Under-Secretary as he’s called, is a very grand figure at the top of this big diplomatic network. I tried to pop down and see him in my second week to ask him a question, and the door was barred. Eventually civil servants got in touch with each other and an appointment was fixed ten days later, and then there was a sort of... I said, ‘I’ll go down and see him’ and they said, ‘You can’t do that. He has to come to you’. The whole thing was sort of wonderfully stage managed – bit Gilbert and Sullivan-ish!

They were just very different ways of operating. Funnily enough there were bits of both systems: the small, intimate nature of DCMS was fun in all sorts of ways; the slightly more formalised way that the Foreign Office did other bits of it made life as a minister much easier, because everybody knew where they were – there was a structure and an order to it that wasn’t always there in a smaller, more informal department.

**TG: How did you experience that sort of structure and order and the bits that were helpful to you doing your job?**

**HR:** I think what made the structure of the Foreign Office quite helpful is that things did bounce their way up through a series of subsidiary levels. The paperwork in the Foreign Office is a huge, huge part of the job – I thought running an Olympics was quite busy but there was much more paperwork in the Foreign Office than even doing London 2012. But by the time a paper arrived on your desk, or in your box, for a decision as a minister, it had been through all these different levels – the head of desk, the ambassador – everybody had had a chance to comment on it, so there was a very finished piece of work. Whereas in a slightly more informal structure at DCMS, things would quite often slip into you that hadn’t been totally nailed down inside the department and you would often find that you’d set off to do something, then it had an impact on some other area that hadn’t been teased out in the process. So the more structured Foreign Office way definitely produced better paperwork, but it took a lot longer to get to decisions and, arguably, that might not have worked so well with London 2012 which was a very, very fast pace and needed lots of regular decisions.

**TG: What about your private office? How did it work?**

**HR:** Very well. I think there is a difficult moment for any new minister coming in, about inheriting somebody else’s private office. It’s a balance: they know their way around, they have the experience of doing things, they’re able to advise you, but on the other hand they’re never entirely yours. When you’ve turned it over for the first time, you do feel ‘This is my office’, and, because they’ve only worked for you, they then have a very clear view of what you want and how to do it. On balance, I’d been inclined to get your own private offices as far as possible.

One thing I did learn is always to back an able person over an industry specialist. When I was trying to recruit a new private secretary, there was a bit of, ‘You can’t have X or Y because they don’t do the Middle East, they don’t have Middle East experience’. Actually, we took the best person, and it proved to be the right decision, rather than getting somebody just because they’re a specialist – a good person will pick it up, and once they’ve done that will perform all the better.

**NH: Okay, so what did you find most frustrating about being minister?**

**HR:** Not very much. I personally enjoyed my time as a minister. You need to keep your eye on what Downing Street is doing, but that’s just a part of the job.

When we started in DCMS you would open the door and find six civil servants standing with a file tucked under their arm, all wanting to work out what they were dealing with.

I don’t think I’ve really had many frustrations. I was amazed by how badly people lobby government very often. I was Minister for Tourism for a bit in 2012/2013, and there was a theory that what you do is bash government for not doing something and then you hope that it will be so shocked by this it’ll do

what you want. Actually, of course, it does absolutely the opposite, and once you've gone into the paper and hammered the government, your chances of then getting the minister responsible to do what you want him, or her, to do is almost zero.

I massively enjoyed my time as a minister.

**NH: If we think about it slightly differently, is there anything you think would make government work more effectively?**

**HR:** Well in my experience as a minister, government did work pretty effectively. If you look at the two areas that I had initially, Olympics and sport, government generically did well over London 2012. You might say it's one of the most successful things the government has done. I was enormously impressed by the Foreign Office when I moved there subsequently; the standard of civil servants in the Foreign Office is very high indeed. The standard of our ambassadors around the Middle East and North Africa was bordering on exceptional. I mean really good, high quality, clever people who were exceptionally devoted to their job. I went into government with a whole lot of preconceptions about the Civil Service, and came out of it thinking 'Thank goodness I live in the United Kingdom' because they served me very well and, I think, serve the country very well.

The Civil Service spends a lot of time navel gazing, working out how it can change its practices but actually if it concentrates on recruiting high-grade people, and it still retains high-grade people, then I think it will continue to do a good job. In a sense the lesson is more one for government. If government wants to function it needs a high-grade Civil Service and it needs to make sure it's positioned and remunerated accordingly. I had very few bad civil servants if I'm honest.

**TG: Can I actually ask you, why did you decide to step back into business?**

**HR:** I took the view that most politicians have a life cycle and politics is a thing that permanently moves on. Apart from my first year in Parliament, I've been on the Conservative Party frontbench right the way through my Parliamentary career. I went on it in 2002 and got through to 2014, 12 years later, of which four and a half had been in Government. I thought I'd probably had my turn and I could sense that there was a generation that had arrived in the big intake of 2010, coming up behind me, all of whom wanted jobs. I thought if I stayed for another five years I'd be 57, 58, it'd be much more difficult to make the change.

I accepted that I'd had my moment as a minister and it wasn't going to last forever, and once you've accepted that, it then makes sense to get out while you're still enjoying it and before people are totally fed up with you. My little test was to see whether people in the constituency would say, 'Why are you going?' not 'What a good decision', and actually they all did.

The two jobs I'd had, both of them had been very all-embracing, and even if I was at home for a weekend in the Foreign Office, for a whole weekend, it was a constant stream of telephone calls and boxes going backwards and forwards and all the rest of it. I've got a young son and I thought if I do this for another three or four years, he's going to grow up and I'm never going to get to the school sports day or anything else like that. And I thought I've got one more thing left to do. So it was a combination of all those things and actually I'd make the same decision again.

**TG: Did the fact that your seat is presumably reasonably safe have an impact on the decision making process there?**

**HR:** No, not really. I knew I could stay through until I was 65 and retire but I couldn't quite convince myself. I mean it's great fun being at the centre of things but my thought was that as a Minister of State in the Foreign Office I'd had a good run, and so I just decided to get out before the system got me. The seat didn't really impact on it very much because I wasn't thinking 'Actually if I don't leave now I'll get hammered at the ballot box', I knew I could stay within reason.

**NH: So just a couple of final, quick general questions. Based on all of your experiences, how would you define an effective minister?**

**HR:** One who sets very clear aims and priorities and achieves them. You've got to be very, very clear about what you're trying to do. It's hopeless for civil servants if they don't know where the minister's coming from. It's almost the worst thing. So just be very, very clear with what you're trying to do and what you're trying to achieve.

**NH: And beyond that are there any bits of practical advice or tips that you'd give to people doing the role for the first time?**

**HR:** Build some slack into your daily diary. You've got to go at this really hard and commit yourself to it because you're probably only going to get one opportunity. It's an extraordinary privilege to do it, and so you should focus on what you want to do and then really go at it hard for the time that you do it. But just accept that politics is an uncertain game and all sorts of things are going to happen that you haven't planned, so just make sure the whole time you build a little bit of flexibility into what you're doing so you can cope with it. And probably never lose your temper. I only did once in four and a half years, and I've regretted it ever since.

**NH: Did you have any coping strategies for when you thought you were going to lose it? How to hold back?**

**HR:** When I was in the Army, somebody said that officers should be like ducks – you need to look very smooth on the surface even if you're paddling like goodness underneath! And actually ministers are a bit like ducks; they need to look cool and in charge and across things, even if underneath or inside they're all thinking 'goodness me. What do we do next?' You are giving leadership to a group of civil servants, and you've got to make sure that they've got confidence in your ability to cope with it, and deal with it.

Never forget the personal touches. I used to walk the floor very, very regularly; you could do it at DCMS very easily because we were all on one floor and you just walk round and talk to people the whole time. The Foreign Office it was [gasp] 'Minister's coming!' scraping of chairs and everybody stood up. I used to do it every month or so, just go for a wonder. It's a really good thing to do. You just walk around and 'What are you working on this afternoon?', 'Is that your son? How old is he?', or 'Is that your daughter?', 'Is that a photo of your wedding?' – all of those little personal touches make a huge amount of difference. Having said be focused, and be very clear and all those great things, don't forget that you're a human being and you're dealing with human beings, and they respond to people who treat them decently.

**TG: I was wondering what you took from your previous two big careers – the military and then finance – that you found very useful in being a minister?**

**HR:** Funnily enough, I worked at the Foreign Office at the end of my military career for a bit, so it wasn't an entirely strange organisation. This business about being very clear about what you're trying to achieve and having a clear and simple aim is a very military principle. There was a great saying in the Army, 'You should never knock off as an officer until you make sure your soldiers are through and settled'. You've got civil servants that you're responsible for leading and giving guidance to, and you just need to make sure you look after them properly. And actually it's a rather nice thing – there are a whole series of directors who worked at the Government Olympic Executive for whom I've acted as a referee for jobs afterwards, and that's a good sign that the relationship works. There are very, very few, if any, civil servants that I would be embarrassed about meeting again. In fact, I'd rather like to see most of them again. They're human beings and they need looking after, it comes back to that really. Treat them decently and you'll get more out of them.

**NH: And anything that you wanted to raise that hasn't come up?**

**HR:** There's quite an interesting case study to be done in slower time about the best example of a senior government figure taking a clear and collected decision. The Prime Minister's performance at the

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meeting in the Cabinet Room that we had the day the G4S contract finally collapsed was the best example of clear, incisive leadership that I saw in four and a half years in Government.

The way he got everybody round the table, summed up what had gone wrong, got to the bottom of what we needed to do and the issues that were involved, translated that into what needed to be done to put it right and then got everybody geared up. The sting in the tail was, 'I want everybody back in two days, so if you have any problems we need to know about beforehand. I don't want anybody sitting round this table in two days' time telling me that they've not done what they're supposed to do. Is that clear? Thank you very much'.

You could have heard a pin drop. He's a clever guy, but it was a perfect example of how to sum up a difficult, complex issue and then do what was required to save an Olympics at a time that the press was banging at the door and saying you can't keep the event safe.

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