

# Ministers reflect

Mark Prisk

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# Mark Prisk

## Biographical details

## Electoral History

2001-2015: Member of Parliament for Hertford and Stortford

## Parliamentary Career

2012-2013: Minister of State for Housing

2010-2012: Minister of State for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise

2009-2010: Shadow Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills

2005-2009: Shadow Minister for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform

*Mark Prisk was interviewed by Jen Gold and Sophie Wilson on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project*

**Jen Gold (JG): Thinking back to when you first started as a minister, what was your experience of coming into government like?**

**Mark Prisk (MP):** I think on the one hand there is the euphoria of having worked in opposition as I had for seven years and finally being able to turn ideas into action. My impression was on the whole that the system... the Civil Service is a curate's egg – you have good parts and poor parts – and as with any new job learning where the strengths and weaknesses are of your immediate team and then the specialist teams below that is a part of the role. I think also understanding what the minister is there to do and what they're not there to do. I always see this as a role of having... my job was to be a cattle prod to enable and make sure there was clear direction. Not to be the expert but to know how to work with different experts in order to achieve your goals. So being outcome-orientated is very important. But on the whole I was generally encouraged and impressed with the support and the nature of the service that's there. And I think it's just a question as with any business – and I'd come from a business background – is understanding what you're trying to achieve and having clear goals and outcomes is critical to being effective.

**JG: And in terms of your previous roles and experiences, obviously you'd shadowed the brief for a time.**

**MP:** That's right.

**JG: How did you feel that prepared you for the job?**

**MP:** I think it was invaluable because it allows you to move beyond the partisan point-scoring at the dispatch box and start to think about what you would actually do in their shoes. I think that's quite an important part of the role. So I think the shadowing role is important because if you're a thinking person, it means that you realise that very soon the problems – the delays or errors that you're talking about for the government of the day – are soon going to be your problems. So how will you deal with it? I think that shadow role is important learning experience. Also as things become more specialist, so the need to have time before government of getting them to understand the issues, who the players are in that particular field, why they have a particular perspective, whose advice is sound and whose is not so sound. You need to learn that before you come into government.

**JG: And you touched on support, but can you give a sense of what sort of support was available to you on coming into the role at BIS [Department for Business Innovation and Skills]?**

**MP:** Yes. Well the private office is crucial. I think your Principal Private Secretary and your Diary Secretary are probably the two most important people because if that relationship isn't working then the practicality of day-to-day operations just doesn't function. So knowing them and them knowing you is absolutely critical.

Beyond that, if there is an area where I think there's a lot more work to do, I do not think government probably pays its lawyers enough and therefore the quality of legal advice is very varied. You could have a variety in policy advice across government anyway. But I would say that when I'm looking for lawyers to advise me on what needs to happen, I'm looking for advice as to what can be done and not being told what can't be done. I know what can't be done. And so I think there is a weakness in the calibre of the people we're able to recruit in government. I would also say that the skills base is too orientated in some departments towards passing legislation and not focused on delivering the projects. And that I would say that is one of the fundamental problems with the Service as a whole.

**JG: And was there anything you found particularly surprising in the first few weeks? Something you weren't expecting?**

**MP:** No. I think because I'd been a shadow minister for seven years I'd kind of tracked and understood what was likely to come. And I'm not, I would hope I'm not too naïve, so I kind of understood that organisations, you know, they're a large organisation – there will be tensions within them, there will be differences of personalities, the department will have a view on things. So I was generally on the whole encouraged. There were some very good people; there were some less good people. I don't think there any huge surprises, no.

**JG: What were your initial priorities coming into office? Obviously you had a broad portfolio, but were there one or two policy priorities that you really wanted to hit the ground running with?**

**MP:** I think obviously when I came into office, first of all we were a coalition. So the manifesto transmuted into the Coalition Agreement. So it was more complicated and it took more time to be able to re-focus on what we were meant to deliver. My initial portfolio in business was very broad. And within three weeks I was also asked by the Prime Minister to take on the trade job as well for nine months. So I think the key thing was understanding what the main policy outcomes were in each of those areas and then making sure that we were delivering on them. So I was very delivery-focused, very outcome-focused, and project management-focused. So whether it was getting Automotive Council to make sure that we were attracting back Tier 1 Investors to strengthen the supply chain. Whether it was revamping the whole of the business support system through Business Link, whether it was moving forward quickly on the red tape challenge, the removal of the RDAs [Regional Development Agencies] and the replacement by those of the LEPs [Local Enterprise Partnerships] and so on, there was a whole series of different plates to keep spinning in each of those areas. And part of the job is constantly being able to look at the things that really matter and keep those running at all times because as Minister of State at that stage, it is about driving forward the things that you said you were doing to deliver.

**JG: Just on your point about the coalition dynamic.**

**MP:** Yes.

**JG: You were in the unusual position of having a Liberal Democrat as a Secretary of State. How unique did that make your experience as a new minister?**

**MP:** It wasn't typical. It was unusual. I mean Energy, BIS, I'm trying to remember who else? I think those were the only two departments weren't they? Oh and Scotland. They were the only departments where there was a cabinet minister headed by the minority party. So that changes a little bit trying to understand where he was coming from. Not least the fact that Vince [Cable, then Business Secretary] was not necessarily part of the inner circle of the Liberal Democrat leadership and so there was an added tension there in understanding what his objectives were. He was always very courteous in my direction and we got on perfectly well professionally speaking. I never had any difficulties with Vince at all as a boss. You just had to understand that they were coming from a different angle and that's where it was. So not major differences.

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

**MP:** I think it's about setting the direction rather than trying to run everything and understanding the distinction between those two things. I think it's about setting standards. So, for example, I wanted the Small Business Team to understand what it was like. So I got the Permanent Secretary to agree that everyone working in the Small Business Team would over the following year spend five working days in a small business. But I felt if I was going to ask them to do that, I should do that. So I did. So that kind of leading by example is important. I think making sure that everybody in the team, no matter what their role, feels they're able to talk to me and engage with me. I'm not a hierarchical person.

I think giving a sense of pride in what people do is important. So I initiated the use of the reception area to promote British business in the business department. And we had everything from an Augusta Westland helicopter through to three F1 cars, through to robots and all sorts of other things in the reception and we did displays every month. And what that did was it showcased British businesses, particularly smaller businesses. But it also gave the teams within the department a sense of pride that their bit of work that they were specialists in, marine engineering or whatever it was, got the chance to be showcased. And that I think that was a good morale booster for the department. And it just seemed to me we had a space we were wasting. It was a rather draughty hall that was not used for much. And yet there we were in a prime position to show people what we actually do and what we make. So those sorts of things I think are important in terms of morale, motivation, and getting people to feel that it's about what we can do, rather than a tension between civil servants and politicians. I'm not interested in playing those sorts of games. Some people like all that sort of nonsense. My view is you're only going to get there if you take people with you and that's what I tried to do.

**Sophie Wilson (SW): So thinking about the day-to-day reality of being a minister, how was most of your time spent?**

**MP:** Gosh. I wanted it to be spent on making sure that I was driving progress in each of the goals we'd set and we did pretty well on that. Too much time does get drawn into seeing the stakeholders – every trading association wants to have their 45 minutes with you, when you could spend the entire time just meeting trading associations. So you have to balance that in a way.

So your question was really about what was the time spent on, rather than what it should have been. I would have to say on the whole because I'm very focused on maximising time, I would say on the whole that I got the balance broadly right. I probably didn't spend enough time here at the House encouraging my party colleagues into what marvellous things I was doing. I didn't promote myself sufficiently. So as a politician that would be a weakness. I took the view my job was to get on to do the job we had to do. And I wasn't that fussed about that or indeed about putting myself on the media. So that was a weakness I think, probably. But that's speaking as a politician, rather than as a minister.

**SW: So how did you cope with those competing demands?**

**MP:** It is literally dealing with the next ball that comes over the net. That's the way you have to do it. You'll have a fixed diary which will be ripped up before you come in through the front door each morning because something has changed. So I think you just have to go with the flow. I was fairly robust in the things that were not to be moved. But you'll also just get that tension. And there's no point well saying, 'Oh well, sorry, I can't possibly do that today. I'm too busy'. You just have to fit it in, that's just the nature of it. So you work longer hours and that's how it works.

**SW: Could you talk through an occasion where an unexpected event or crisis hit the department and can you describe how you dealt with it?**

**MP:** Yeah. I suppose one of the good ones I would describe to you would be when General Motors came over and said that they were either going to close Ellesmere Port or the German factory at Bochum within the Opel/Vauxhall Group. And I think the department rose to the challenge. I think also to be fair the trade unions in this case and the private sector side of Unite and the workforce at Ellesmere Port stepped up to the plate. And the whole of government then rallied round. So we won that battle quite comfortably in the end.

The natural anxiety was that if an American company was thinking about whether they'd invest in engineering and manufacture, would they go to Germany or would they come here? The chances are they would have gone to Germany. Well they didn't. And they didn't because we had our act together. We were clear and consistent with our messaging. They were getting answers not just from the department – so the Secretary of State and myself – but also from the Trade Minister, the Ambassador in Washington and so on, and the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. So everybody was roped in to do that. And I project managed that process to make sure that we were talking to the unions, we had the labour members on board, we had all the different bits of government talking to the right people and so

on. I was very impressed with the team ambition to get that right. And the result is that the new generation of Astras are being built in the United Kingdom and not in Germany. So that was a good example.

**JG: And what do you feel was your greatest achievement in office? Something you are particularly proud of.**

**MP:** I'm proud of that as an example. I think the rebirth of the automotive industry is something that I'm very genuinely proud of. We moved the agenda away from intervention or no intervention to government being a genuine partner, but making it clear that the sector has to lead. So we got industrial policy right, I think. And the ingredients were there, but somebody had to drive that forward. And I think if you said to me, if there was one thing, I would say the regeneration of the renewed confidence in the UK automotive industry is probably one of my proudest things.

**JG: And are there any factors that you'd highlight that really contributed to that success?**

**MP:** It was helpful that the Secretary of State was very on board and got it. I think the key is it's about communication and relationships. And understanding what it is the sector really needs. I think those are the keys to it. But really it comes down to relationships and communication. It's about listening and understanding where our strengths and weaknesses were. It helped that I came from the business world, so I immediately have an instinctive feel for competitive advantage, understanding the technologies and so on. And because I'd spent five years in opposition tracking some of this, I kind of knew the core issues around the shift towards the new generation of engines, where the UK's strengths lay in terms of engines, and the power train technologies. So just understanding where our strengths and weaknesses lay, and a willingness of government to pump prime a little bit of the technology investment in order for us to get ahead. I think that's probably one thing – there's quite a few things – but I think that's one thing I'd be very keen on.

**JG: And what did you find the most frustrating thing about being a minister?**

**MP:** The centre – whether that's Number 10 or Cabinet Office – changing its mind, changing arrangements at very short notice, a failure to plan ahead. Chopping and changing and therefore distracting people from getting on with the job.

**JG: Obviously the centre is responsible for reshuffles...**

**MP:** Yes.

**JG: And you moved to CLG [Department of Communities and Local Government] to take on Housing.**

**MP:** Housing that's right. Yes.

**JG: And what was that experience like of coming into a role that you hadn't shadowed?**

**MP:** No. That's true. I was fortunate because I'm a chartered surveyor, so I understand housing and property professionally speaking. So I was lucky in that. If I'd been dropped into something where I knew nothing about it all, it would have been a greater challenge. Again, I had an outstanding private office at CLG – my Diary Secretary and PPS [Principal Private Secretary] were just first class. And there's an excellent set of spads [special advisers] there as well.

I think what you had to remember at BIS was that because of the coalition arrangement, I had no Parliamentary Private Secretary, no MP there, and I had no access to a Conservative special adviser. So I was politically very isolated in that sense. And that's difficult because sometimes you just need to chew something over with somebody. You may have it in your mind, but being able to chew it over and just get a sense of what you think is possible, is difficult on your own. So there is a very lonely existence in that sense. They finally gave me a very good PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary] in Andrew Jones. But I

still had no spad to access. Got to CLG and the spad of spads in Sheridan Westlake was there who had an intimate knowledge of everything the department did. So he and Eric [Pickles, then Communities and Local Government Secretary] were very helpful and supportive. So I enjoyed it. And it would have been a job I would have wanted to have done anyway. I am very lucky, I've done two jobs that I would want to have done and thoroughly enjoyed doing. And not everybody gets that chance.

**JG: And one of our questions actually is about your private office and how you made sure that functioned effectively. Do you have any tips or advice?**

**MP:** Because I used to running a small business, I'm used to working with a small team. And similarly, if you've spent time running your own constituency office, you should be at least able to run a reasonably good team. And it's about a clear sense of purpose. It's about respecting the fact that work is not the only thing these people do and having a clear distinction. Good manners – my parents would say, 'Just because you're the minister doesn't mean you have to behave like Little Lord Fauntleroy'.

I also took the view that it was important to be seen around the department. So I would always eat downstairs in the canteen. I would walk around the floors, very often unannounced, much to the horror of the managers initially. But people liked that. The Homes and Communities Agency, for example, which was up Tottenham Court Road, I was the first minister ever to actually go and visit their offices, which I found peculiar that I was the first minister. And they wanted me to meet with the senior management. I said, 'That will be fine, that will be 30 minutes, the other hour I want to spend walking round the floors and talking to the staff'. And they are just very simple things that actually motivate people, that don't actually take a great deal of time. They just require a little bit of thought about the team you're building. If the team is motivated and they feel confident in you, the team will produce the things you need. If you're just shouting and screaming then you've lost it already. And Eric [Pickles] was very strong on this and rightly so in my view. He made it very clear to all ministers coming in that under no circumstances were you to ever shout at people or whatever. And that's right. And if you've got to that stage you've lost it anyway.

I think if there's a weakness amongst us as politicians, it's that far too few have experience of running anything. Our job as a minister is not to run things. Our job is to set the direction and help us all collectively achieve that outcome. And it is not to tinker and meddle. It doesn't mean you can't be... if people are clearly dragging their heels and being difficult, then it doesn't mean that you can't be challenging with them. But if you're just being rude and shouting and throwing things at people, that's unacceptable. And what was very notable, I have to say, although the Civil Service were discrete about it, it was self-evident that under the previous government they had been used to a significant number of those ministers behaving in a disgraceful fashion. And I think what those ministers don't understand is that they will never get things done that way anyway. Because frankly if you're going to behave like that then everyone is going to dig their heels in and quite rightly so. So courtesy, manners, leadership by example, understanding that work is not the only thing your private office has to deal with are important.

**JG: You have partly answered this question, but based on your experience, how would you define an effective minister? Is there anything you would add to your previous comments?**

**MP:** I would say be clear about what your outcomes are, good at motivating the team to want to achieve those outcomes, and where I was probably weakest was in then spending sufficient time in communicating that to your MP colleagues and the media. And that was probably my weakness.

**JG: And was that due to constraints on your time?**

**MP:** No, it's a little bit me. You have to push other things out of the way in order to spend enough time with the media. And I would do the media. I mean I did a lot of media stuff, but I would tend to do it if I was asked because I wasn't personally interested in promoting Mark Prisk. But I think tactically it's probably a mistake, in the sense that actually whether we like it or not, that's part of the process. And if people don't see you then they don't know what you're doing. And so unless you're out there banging the

drum remorselessly, tirelessly, tediously, I think people will tend to move on. And that's a nature of a 24-hour media. So I would say that was probably my weakness.

**SW: What advice would you give to a minister entering government for the first time?**

**MP:** Well, be clear about what you are trying to achieve and why. Understand who is good and who is not so good around you or what their skillset is. I think that's one thing about the Civil Service, we need a broader range of skillsets.

Realise that you probably have a year or 18 months in which to do it. I was fortunate that the Prime Minister on the whole has preferred to leave people in situ to get on with it, which is a very good thing. It doesn't always happen and the closer you get to general elections, the more reshuffles tend to happen. But I would say be very clear about what you're trying to achieve and be clear about the best way of motivating your team to get there.

**JG: And with hindsight, would you have done anything differently? You mentioned obviously the media...**

**MP:** I didn't promote Mark Prisk Plc sufficiently which meant that in the scheme of things, in the reshuffles and so on, that will have contributed to the Prime Minister feeling that... he said that he needed to make way for new, younger faces. And he had been very happy with the job that I had done. I have never had any negative feedback. And that's fair enough, that's the nature of the beast. So I think my weakness was definitely not promoting myself sufficiently.

**JG: Obviously you were in two departments that were undergoing significant cuts.**

**MP:** Yeah.

**JG: And CLG had the highest proportion of staff cuts.**

**MP:** Yes.

**JG: And how did that impact your work and the agenda you were trying to drive forwards?**

**MP:** Do you know at the end of the 40% we wondered really what all those people did actually. I think the departments had become heavily over-staffed, over-bloated – although it's always a painful process.

I think the one thing where we never quite settled it, and it's a difficult one, is what I said to the Permanent Secretaries in both cases, ministers will... there's a habit within the Civil Service of the minister making an off the cuff remark about, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we could look at such and such' and the team going off and trying to sort that problem out. And I think they needed the department to come back and say we can either do A, B or C but we can't do A, B and C. So ministers understanding that there are costs to choices in how they run the department. And I think that's important because otherwise civil servants want to do what the elected government has been asked to do. And ministers can quite easily and idly say, 'Yes, let's have a look at this'. 'Let's do a paper on that'. 'Let's have a little bit of a look at...' And you set up a whole raft of work that on reflection you don't need doing. And so being clear and more focused about the work that does need to be done and it's priority. I think it's a dialogue that needs to be stronger between ministers and the top of the Civil Service, so you don't get what I would call too many blind alleys pursued.

**JG: And you mentioned some of the challenges around working with Number 10, but did you have to do much with other departments?**

**MP:** Yeah, I did actually because of course with BIS I was working with [Department for] Transport on the automotive sector and the work in terms of low-carbon vehicles. We were working with Transport also in terms of aerospace.

In the deregulatory role I was working with every department, much to their horror, because obviously we were trying to stop them from passing more laws and more regulations. So we had various cabinet ministers coming in being very unhappy with the deregulation agenda. And I worked with Oliver Letwin [then Minister for government policy] and Steve Hilton [then Number 10 adviser] on the Deregulation Panel. So we have every department in – including the Home Office kicking and screaming – to get them to do it. So I had a unique opportunity to look at the regulatory burden across the whole of Whitehall and understand the culture – everybody, DECC [Department of Energy and Climate Change], Defra [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs], Home Office, the whole shebang.

And similarly in housing, clearly Work and Pensions and housing benefit issues. So I appeared before the Work and Pensions Select Committee, as well as the CLG Select Committee. So yes, across pretty much the bulk of Whitehall.

**JG: And from your experience, are there any ways that cross-departmental working could be improved or did you feel it worked reasonably effectively during your time in government?**

**MP:** Some of the departments still have a silo mentality. I'm not wholly sure that having ministers across two departments actually changes that. I think that's superficial, what it means is no one is quite sure whether the person is in their department or the other department. And do they have two private offices? It doesn't really stack.

I do think we need to think about the shape of Whitehall in terms of outcomes, rather than resources and inputs. I personally think we haven't yet changed Parliament sufficiently to stop us dragging departments into legislating more than they otherwise need to. So I think in terms of cross-Whitehall processes, it's better. It's certainly better. But again it's about leadership and culture. That's what it's about.

**JG: And obviously you've had experience working under two different Secretaries of State. Are there any lessons or practical tips you can share about forging effective working relationships?**

**MP:** Two different styles. Vince is much more self-contained as a person. So wasn't tending to be... was perfectly civil and pleasant but not a sharer. Eric was more of a sharer, more of a team player, team leader, which would be my natural way to approach things. I think it's very important that the secretary of state with the ministerial team does see themselves as a team leader. I think that's an important issue and it is not the case across Whitehall – I'm aware of other departments where that just simply isn't the case. The secretary of state either feels that somehow the burden is on them and therefore they must deal with everything, which is a mistake. Or that somehow they only feel comfortable if they're on top of everything and that is a mistake. So a secretary of state has to, even more than a minister of state has to do, be tilting the tiller as it were, rather than trying to delve down into the process. I think the relationship also between the permanent secretary and the secretary of state is very important in that context as well.

**JG: And then just a final question on special advisers. You made some comments earlier but what's your view on how much support Ministers of State or even Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State need? Obviously they don't have the same access to special advisers as Secretaries of State.**

**MP:** I think the system has evolved importantly. When we started in 2010 there was the whole culture of wanting to show that we had fewer political appointees. And frankly it's nonsense because the public doesn't really clock onto any of that. It's all a Whitehall, Westminster kind of story. They're not aware

what special advisers are. And they certainly don't know what the initials 'spad' stands for. And I think the danger then if you come in as a group of new ministers, the natural anxiety is that the culture of the old regime which... particularly because it had been in government for 13 years, that somehow you're fighting the system. So I think having experienced special advisers is important, political advisers.

I actually think there is also the older habit of appointing somebody who is an expert in a particular field as a special adviser. That seems to have died out. It tends now to be bright young things who want to go on to be MPs themselves. And that's fine, you need somebody to act as a sounding board in that regard, but I also think there is a case for having perhaps an older specialist as a special adviser where someone is dealing with a very complex issue. I mean in truth, David Freud, Lord Freud, although a minister is in some ways that kind of person in work and pensions with Iain Duncan Smith. He is the technical guru. And I think you need someone like that, where the secretary of state has to deal with the outcomes but somebody needs to get into the weeds as to whether the system works and whether technically speaking it's structured properly, especially when it comes to do with finance.

Do you have any other questions?

**SW: Just whether there is anything else we haven't asked about that you'd like to mention.**

**MP:** I think the only other thing I would say is I think there is a strong case for a greater interaction between public and private in the Civil Service and in Whitehall generally. I think we've created unduly restrictive barriers between public and private. I understand the anxiety around corruption and someone working for a company and then immediately going into Whitehall and then going back into that company with that knowledge. I think we need to be a little less hysterical about that because there are a whole range of skillsets in the private sector particularly around project management which the Civil Service desperately needs.

I mean we as politicians and the media have tended to push everything... the culture within the Civil Service still prizes policymaking and passing legislation when actually the delivery in an effective way of programmes is a skillset that still is sadly lacking across far too many departments. There are some very good people – I had an outstanding team running the wind down of the RDAs. We had nine agencies set up under a previous government many of whose board members were strong supporters of that government running nine organisations, in nine regions of 2,500, spending £2.3 billion and nearly 2,000 live commercial contracts. And we had to gently implode all of that, wind all of that down. It was a hugely difficult project to manage and without dropping anyone of them. At any time any one of those boards could have resigned and the department would have to run that agency directly. And we avoided all of that because I had a really first class project management team, which I spent time making sure we had. But that was an enormous amount of time and effort to get that right.

That excellence is sadly lacking all too often across Whitehall. And there are some people who couldn't run a programme. They're marvellous at drafting the niceties of legislation and that's fine. But the whole thing is skewed too much towards passing another piece of legislation or devising theoretical policy and I think the training and the backgrounds and the skillsets of the Civil Service does need to be reset and I think the only way you're going to do that is looking at just changing the way in which project management is delivered, and the private sector has a very good role in that.

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