

Ministers reflect

Tim Loughton

December 2015



Tim Loughton

Biographical details

Electoral History

1997-present: Member of Parliament for East Worthing and Shoreham

Parliamentary Career

2010-2012: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Children and Families

2003-2010: Shadow Children's Minister

2003-2007: Shadow Health Minister

2001-2003: Shadow Spokesman for Health

2000-2001: Shadow Spokesman for Regeneration, Poverty, Regions, and Housing

Tim Loughton was interviewed by Jen Gold and Nicola Hughes on 16th July 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project

Nicola Hughes (NH): So if we can go back when you first started as a minister, what was your experience of coming into government like?

Tim Loughton (TL): In terms of how prepared we were for it all?

NH: Yes.

TL: Well, I had been a shadow minister since 2000 and I'd done the same sort of job in the children's team effectively since 2001. I think I was the longest serving shadow minister in the same position. So I got to know the brief fairly well. That was an advantage.

Secondly, we had quite a coherent team, the shadow education team, so Michael Gove, Nick Gibb and myself – three who all became ministers in the DfE [Department for Education]. So we had the core of a team that worked together. Added to which, I think some of the briefings we got from the Perm Sec [Permanent Secretary] and the DGs [Director Generals] were quite useful. And what I was surprised about was the level of research that they had done on us. In some of the briefing meetings we had in that six months or so ahead of the election, I was having some of my speeches quoted back at me by one of the DGs – 'I gather this is your policy on such and such'. I was quite impressed with the level of research that they, the Civil Service had done on us.

And I think they were equally impressed on the level of preparedness that we had for the programme that we wanted to put in place. And that was a huge advantage. I think where David Cameron got things absolutely right, was that by and large he tried to put people in government who had been in those positions in opposition. And that was a huge advantage in terms of none of us had been in government before including him. So you had to learn how to be a minister for starters. And then for others who came completely new to a department, you had to learn your brief too. So the fact we had the same team, that we had experience of challenging government in opposition, and we'd been in our position for several years, so that we knew our brief and knew the characters we were dealing with – the voluntary sector or schools or whatever – was a huge advantage. So I think we were pretty well prepared and we were able to hit the ground running effectively when we became ministers in the department.

NH: You said just then 'learn how to be a minister', how about that side of things, not the policy brief, but going into a department, the role of a minister itself, how was that to start with?

TL: Well I think that can be very daunting. But if you know your subject, that's hugely helpful in that you're not going in as a complete rookie. If you've worked in business before and you've been an employer, again I think that is helpful. So you know about man/woman management and running teams. And the Department for Education is not commercial, but is effectively a business that employs several thousand people. You need to know how the whole thing ticks, although you're in a slightly strange position because effectively the person running it is the Permanent Secretary and the civil servants but you're their bosses in many respect as well. So it's different from business in that respect.

So we went in and all of a sudden you had to transform your job because your job had been (1) working out what you wanted to do in education, children's services in my case or whatever; but (2) opposing the government and scrutinising the government. All of a sudden you become the government. Some of our colleagues found it quite difficult to change that mind-set, not least when I found myself getting Freedom of Information requests from people on your own side afterwards, and I had put down an awful lot of Freedom of Information requests to the Government. All of a sudden you're the Government. So you've got to completely reverse your role and reverse your mind-set.

4 Ministers reflect

And the other thing that I think which was a symptom of having been in opposition for 13 years, is you are suspicious of the Civil Service. I think because under the Blair government particularly there was a good deal of politicisation of the Civil Service, that one all of a sudden had to realise that they were then to serve you as political masters, having attacked some of the things of the previous government, which they were party to obviously before. So I think that was a difficult mind-set for many people as well.

However, there's one really interesting episode, which was very reassuring for me. One of the first things I did was to abolish the Contactpoint database, which was a database of every child in the country that the last government had set up. And we opposed it at the outset and we made it very clear we would want to abolish it. The last government spent a considerable amount of money setting it up and a considerable number of civil servants within the Department for Education were responsible for that project, it was their baby. So I had a meeting early on with the Deputy Permanent Secretary and all the senior people responsible for that department at which at the outset the DG said, 'Minister we understand that it is your intention and your manifesto commitment to abolish Contactpoint. We are here to make that possible, in an easier a way as possible'. And I never doubted their commitment to do that. I would have found that very difficult. If you were working in a business and you've spent god knows how many years of your life setting up this great new scheme, and then new bosses come in and say, 'Right, we're going to scrap that now'. I would find that quite hard to do. They did it. And so I think was a good example of one appreciating that they are there to carry out policy not to dictate policy. And although there were question marks over a certain few individuals, the professionalism of the Civil Service in being able to do a 180-degree turn and then dedicate themselves to what the new policy agenda is, was pretty impressive I thought. And I never really had any doubts as to the commitment of civil servants to push forward your agenda on those key things like that as well.

NH: Is there anything else that particularly surprised you about being a minister in those first few weeks and months?

TL: Well I think you need to get to know exactly what your powers are or not and what changes you can make or not. I was a lowly parliamentary under-secretary. But partly because of the nature of my boss, Michael Gove, who is a very forceful character, very close to the Prime Minister, and had a very close knit group of political advisers of which the rest of the ministers were sort of somewhere outside the circle, then it was a question of getting a balance of what you could do, or what might be countermanded by the Secretary of State or whatever. So I think I quite quickly found out what it was possible to do and how much you could initiate, rather than just to be there to mind the ship as it were.

The biggest challenge I think was challenging the Civil Service in the way they did things. And there were parts of the Department for Education which were quite poor. And usually they tended to be parts of the department which had not been a priority under the previous government. But rather than effectively close down that department or completely deprioritise it, that department had stayed on. So on something like adoption, adoption was a big agenda for us. We've done a lot of work on it. It's been a big priority for government. It hadn't been a big priority in the previous few years. And so the quality of the adoption department frankly wasn't brilliant. But they just let things trundle on. So I really had to challenge that we are serious about adoption, this is what we need to do. And we had to bring in some better brains and much practical people from outside to then push forward that agenda.

And that's raised questions in the Department for Education as to whether you should just have every area covered or whether you should have a more mobile hit squad of people, who can then all of a sudden go into the issue of the moment, because we need to have a serious resource and a serious drive on that particular initiative which I think is an interesting thing that we have changed within the department. So you find out the limitations of what you can do. You find out the limitations of what the department is able to do. Then it's a question of right, can we now say we need to make sure there's resource. So we need to make sure this is a top-notch section of the DfE because they are the priorities for the government to deliver. So again it's a lot of getting used to what's good and what's not so good.

NH: And how did you get a feel for that?

TL: Well, all the teams in those policy areas I was responsible for, I would have a series of introductory meetings with them all. I also quite liked, and apparently it was revolutionary actually, to go and see some of those departments. There was this extraordinary thing for which I've gotten into some trouble subsequently for saying, but there's a huge divide between the 7th floor of the Department for Education and the rest of the department. I have always worked in open plan offices and so in [my] previous career in the city, if you had a problem that you needed to resolve, you would get in a lift and go and see the person responsible for it. That doesn't happen in the Department for Education. So if you want to have a quick chat with somebody about a particular issue that has come up, then it has to be diarised, you have to organise a meeting, [and] you have to have private officials present. And this is complete nonsense. So I found myself just wondering around the building and saying can we just have a chat about such and such. And people [reacted] like it was a state visit and would leap to attention. I told them don't do that. It was complete nonsense. We are all doing the same job; we are all on the same side. I need to be able to have a quick word with the lead official on such and such if I've got a query. So that was a rather anachronistic thing that I challenged.

And one of the things that I did do, which I think was quite useful, is every Monday morning or whatever, I had an open door slot for a couple of hours or something like that. So if any civil servants from any department wanted to come and see me it was turn up and my private office would do a rota and they could come and have a quick chat about, 'I'm a bit worried about this Minister' or such and such. It was really useful. And it broke down huge barriers between the minister's floor and the rest of the department. And there's still too much of that goes on.

I'm sure it's not just the Department for Education, there are so many other departments where there's a huge disconnect between the management level, ministers, and senior civil servants and the people actually doing the job. And heaven forbid if you're not in the main office. We had offices in Runcorn, Darlington, three or four other offices which I went to visit. And again they hadn't seen a minister in years. And yet these people you were relying on to do... the correspondence department, which was in Runcorn or something like that. So I would have video conferencing with them and actually went to see them. That's just good man-management as you would work with your officials in any other business. It didn't happen, it doesn't sort of happen in the Civil Service. I think it's a real weakness.

NH: And just again on those first few weeks and months, did you have any support, did you have any role models? Were there people helping you make the transition to being a minister?

TL: No, absolutely not. I had no special advisers as well because we were limited on the special advisers and the special advisers we did have, I think we had three, two of them being chief of staff and press officer for Michael Gove and the third one was for the Liberal Democrats and attached to Sarah Teather [then Children and Families Minister]. So I was completely on my own in that respect. So I needed to make some allies out of the civil servants in policy areas where I had a particularly strong interest that we were trying to push. I relied on... I had a very close relationship with many outside organisations in the youth sector and children's charities, so I got a lot of them in. So I was getting direct advice and support from those people, which was helpful.

But otherwise, we had a shopping list of what we wanted to do. We published a child protection manifesto, so we had some quite detailed things and I just got on with it. And because the Secretary of State was pretty well focused on the schools reforms and the first bill that came out was the Schools Bill and had not such a close interest in the children's social care side of the department other than adoption, then effectively I got on with it. And because the Liberals, as it was a coalition then, they had not done any great work in this area, Sarah Teather basically left it entirely to me. So all the stuff around child protection and children in care, adoption, all those sorts of things, I just got on with it.

Jen Gold (JG): You made reference to the sort of shopping list you had, but did you have any big priorities that you really wanted to drive through?

6 Ministers reflect

TL: Yes. I mean the main things we needed to do was an overhaul of child protection and social work. That followed the 'Baby P' [case] and all those [other] high profile cases. So we had a clear agenda there and published what's called 'Back to the Front Line', our manifesto on child protection, ahead of the general election in 2010. So it was a question of putting that into place.

And the first thing we did was to launch a review of child protection under Professor Munro who had done work with us in opposition and she accepted the job of leading that review. And that was launched on June the 10th so within a month of the election in 2010 and it was a really good review and highly respected by everybody in the industry and we got on with it. So there were clear things like that which we knew we needed to do. And I had free rein effectively to do that.

It was then a question of whether we had the expertise and the resource within the department to be able to carry that through. So I made sure we set up best working groups of people who I knew from outside in children's charities and directors of children's services or whatever whose judgment and expertise I valued. So I put them on best working parties to make sure the officials were being guided and informed well. So that really helped to be able to bring in politically not your own people. I had some paid up members of the Labour Party or whatever but committed to driving through some of those reforms. So again that was very helpful. And if I just relied on some of the officials to come up with the regular suspects I don't think we would have had such a proactive challenging group of people making sure those reforms got somewhere.

JG: Were those external stakeholders people you identified whilst shadowing the brief?

TL: Mostly, yes.

JG: Or people you [had] met since...?

TL: In most cases they were people with whom I was familiar. Obviously the department put forward some as well, people they'd used, but I had key people from all sorts of outside organisations that I worked closely with. We did a review of adoption in opposition. And some of the people on that review I put on to a working party for adoption and various other things like that. Professor Munro we'd worked with in opposition, so she was an obvious one to lead up that review.

JG: And then based on your experience, how would you describe the main roles and duties of a minister?

TL: I'm not entirely sure I know that still. It is a very strange job being a minister. I've been a director of a company and as a director of a company you are responsible for the business strategy, the hiring and firing, the man management with a direct sort of chain of command of management. Within a department there are these parallel hierarchies of ministers, the political leadership and the civil servants, the official leadership as well.

And then we had this new beast of the board, which was never well explained. We had no input into who was on that board. I mean the Secretary of State had decided all of that, the outside external directors and everything as well. And it was a...whether it's got any better now, I don't know, but it was a rather muddy mix of what is their role? Is it to oversee the running of the department but not to oversee running of policy because that's not the job of... so it's a very grey area as to how you actually run the Department for Education. But at the end of the day what the Secretary of State says usually goes, in which case what is the role if you're a non-exec director of the Department for Education unless you're completely politicising it with people brought in from outside. So I never quite worked out what my role was there.

In terms of employing people within my private office, people were presented to me. I had this sort of power of veto, but there wasn't much opportunity to bring people on that you knew who had been working for you sometime. And working in private office is quite a strange experience that some civil servants want to do, some people don't because it's quite intensive and quite long hours as well.

But I think my opening gambit was helped by Bertie Basset, jelly babies [pointing to jar of sweets], which you're very welcome to have. I had this on my desk in the Department for Education the whole time I was there. And the first meeting I had was with the Permanent Secretary, the Director Generals, all the senior officials. And one got the clear impression that the meeting was basically to tell you what your job was going to be and I sort of got wind of this. So the Perm Sec was about to sort of kick off with 'Now minister, this is what you'll be doing and these are the priorities'. I said, 'Now, everybody have a jelly baby'. I hand around this jar, so everybody thought oh god, we've got a nutter here. And so everybody tentatively took a jelly baby and handed this jar around. It was so funny to watch. And when they were all tucking into their jelly babies, I said now we're going to do psychometric testing to see how everybody eats their jelly babies, I'm very interested in this. So it completely disarmed them and unnerved them.

And so rather than the Perm Sec and everybody then telling me what I was going to do, I was able to say, 'right now of course, you know what our priorities are, and we need to do this review into child protection. Adoption – we need to set up this task force. We can see some problems here, this was a manifesto commitment and I want to do this'. I took the agenda. Really interesting the dynamics of that.

And I think many ministers, particularly new to a department, would have sat there, taken notes, and said, 'Thank you very much, that's all very helpful'. Between Michael Gove, Nick [Gibb] and myself we seized the agenda. I think that's why in the Department for Education we achieved an awful lot in a very short space of time. And I think of all the departments, the pace of reform, the pace of legislation, and everything else we were doing was much more frenetic in the DfE because we were in a position to be able to say, right, this is what we want to do, rather than be directed as to 'what may or may not be possible minister'.

NH: And thinking about the day-to-day reality of the job, how do you actually spend your time?

TL: I was slightly different I think in that I was usually the first minister in and the last minister out. It helped that my flat is on the same road as the department so it was a five-minute walk. So I was usually in the office by about 7.30am and I rarely left it before about 11pm. And when I left there would be very few lights on. That's what slightly threw them because most ministers will take their red box and go home and do it. And they will pack your red box. And if there's something they want to sneak through that will be at the bottom, by which time you've lost the will to live late at night, so all those sort of tricks.

So during the week I never took home a red box, I would do it in the office. And I would do it as it arrived during the day, whereas other ministers would have everything arrive by such and such a time to go in the box that night or whatever. Much better that in between meetings, and they would constantly fill my diaries with meetings, I would go through the stuff as it was coming in, so I would be able to challenge things. I also just made an informal ruling that if anybody was going to give me a brief, then I would still expect them to still be around in the evening when I was looking at it. And surprise, surprise the length of the briefs got much, much shorter. They gave me huge, great briefs they gave. There was so much stuff that was completely unnecessary, far too much verbiage. Briefs on stuff you didn't necessarily need briefs on. And so I tried to get briefs shortened and what I liked to do is read a brief and get the officials up and challenge 'boom, boom, boom', there and then. And I think that was a much more efficient way. I don't think taking a box home and going through it at midnight is the most effective way of doing things.

So I was in the office a lot but I also did a lot of visiting. I think I did more external visits than any of the other ministers as well. I did a lot of conferences, did a lot of speeches. And because one of my key roles was on failing local authorities, so when Ofsted failed them on a report on social care, what tended to happen in the past was they'd get a letter from the minister saying 'you're very bad people, so we're going to set up an intervention board and you're going to do this boom, boom, boom'. Every authority that failed I would get them in, the chief executive, the leader of the council, director of children's services or whatever. And then I would go and visit them or the other way round. And some authorities I visited, Birmingham being the prime one, several times, I took officials with me. And again that was the best way to find out exactly what was going on. And then I would have a meeting with all the senior

people and then I would say, 'Right, and now I want to go out and see some of your social workers without any managers or any councillors present'.

So I'd then go and see the social workers, being the main sort of workforce troops, and get on the street with them. I'd then get a very different picture, and then be able to go back to see the senior bods at the end of the day who were telling me how wonderful it all was. And I said well funnily enough I've been told that actually this isn't happening or that's happening or whatever. That was the most valuable part of my job. And again ministers should do this as a matter of course and I spent a week of the recess every year just going up, the first year I went to Stockport and I was a social worker for the week – going out, seeing the job at first hand. That was hugely valuable.

And what was a real eye opener for me, I remember I took a whole load of officials to Birmingham, because Birmingham was in severe, and still is in severe, difficulties. And then we went to see some social workers afterwards. And some of those officials at the Department for Education had never met a social worker before. Yet their job was to regulate, oversee, scrutinise the social work profession and children's protection. They'd never actually seen the people or got to work with the people that they were responsible for. So there was a huge disconnect and a lack of experience by officials in the Department for Education about the profession that they were responsible for. So again, I encouraged and some of them did, including my Private Secretary sort of did a week's sabbatical or whatever going and working out on the street. It's not rocket science any of that stuff.

And the other thing we did for children, I set up four little groups. A group of children who were in foster care, a group of children who were in residential children's homes, a group of children who recently left care and a group of children who had been adopted. And every quarter, each of those groups would come and see me in the department and we would give them sandwiches and they would tell me exactly what was going wrong. And again, hugely helpful to get... they are our customers. They are the people that we were largely there to look after. And yet there was nothing in place to get from the horse's mouth that experience. So again I had a lot of kids coming down to my office, telling me as they did, like it was, which was very helpful.

JG: Where did that idea come from, the setting up of these groups?

TL: I just did it. It just seemed an obvious thing to me. Because whenever I go and visit, I visit a lot of children's charities and looked after children's organisations, so I tended to meet a lot of these kids. And they usually had some quite interesting things to say. Well I thought for goodness sake, let's get a group of them who can see me on a regular basis and tell me if our reforms are having any effect or not in practice.

JG: And in terms of other demands on your time, obviously Parliament, your constituency, how did you balance those competing demands?

TL: The Civil Service seems to be completely oblivious to the fact that you have 90,000 constituents who are responsible for you being in Parliament in the first place. They are also exceedingly poorly versed on how the House of Commons works. So I had to book slots in my diary where I could come and spend a few hours with my staff over here [House of Commons] going through the constituency stuff. What I would tend to do is be in the department or out on visits or speeches virtually the whole day, come over here for voting late afternoon, early evening, do all the constituency correspondence – I'd have a great pile of that – vote, go back to the department, and do all the stuff that is left over from the box.

So the balance between ministerial responsibilities and constituency/parliamentary responsibility is really poor. And they asked me to give a talk to the staff about how Parliament works. And virtually the entire staff came. It was a packed room. And they were... a lot of them said that's really interesting, I learned a lot. I mean it shouldn't take a minister to tell civil servants how Parliament works and why ministers need to be over here for votes and running whips and all this sort of thing. So there is a bit of a disconnect between the government departments and Parliament as well. And of course your first responsibility has to be to turn up in Parliament to vote, to make statements, or take questions or

whatever on your brief. So that was a weakness too.

NH: What about more generally staying in touch with the political side of stuff, talking to back benchers and knowing what was going on in the party?

TL: Again the Civil Service doesn't really sort of recognise that. I held and I think I was one of the first ones to do it, and it's now become common place for us, sort of surgeries for back benchers who had any queries on constituency issues or children's policy or whatever. Now there are tearoom surgeries regularly held by most ministers, usually run through the PPSC [Parliamentary Private Secretaries]. You can book a slot to go and see the Home Secretary to raise whatever you want to raise, which is good.

Michael Gove was very good at giving briefings to MPs, particularly to Liberal Democrat MPs, interestingly. He seemed to spend more time with the Lib Dem side of the Coalition because there were controversial things happening in schools reforms, which he needed to keep the other side of the Coalition on side. So we spent quite a lot of time talking through the politics of what we were doing with MPs on all sides.

And I also had an open house to Labour MPs as well. My end of the department was not as party political as the education reforms. So there was not a lot that we necessarily disagreed with on children and social care. So I put some Labour MPs on some of the working parties. I was never, ever asked, in all my years with all my experience of children and social care under a Labour government to have an input into any working parties. But it just seemed crazy where you've got some people with some real experience. People like Anne Coffey who was a former social worker, has done a lot of work on missing children, so we put her on one of the working parties around child sexual exploitation. And I did a joint press conference with her when we launched our child sexual exploitation action plan and things like that. It seemed the right thing to do. So I was very keen to try and transcend party political boundaries on that. The private office is always very nervous about that sort of thing. But I think its crazy. So I was often having Labour MPs in to talk about scandals that were going in Rochdale, for example, and Rotherham.

JG: And I wonder if you could talk us through an occasion where an unexpected event or crisis hit the department, something you had to deal with, and how you went about that?

TL: Well at my end of the department we had very few crises, I'm pleased to say. On some of the schools reforms there were problems early on with the Building Schools for the Future programme and I know that we were all hauled in on a Sunday afternoon together with the senior civil servants because there had been some leaks and some flaws in the documents that the government put forward. So everybody was summonsed in on a Sunday afternoon to come up with an action plan on how we were going to deal with that.

Part of that, there were some moles in the department. And we were a bit naïve I think, because I mentioned earlier about the Civil Service having been politicised a bit. We had a few, only a few individuals within the DfE who were clearly working for the other side and subsequently went to work for the Labour Party, including in some quite sensitive areas. So we were a bit naïve in thinking that all the Civil Service would be entirely onside and discrete. There were [some] very political people left over from the previous administration who caused us a few headaches and so some of those leaks were down to some of those people. But there were no great panics. There were a few things that went a bit awry. But in my end of things, I don't think there were any great problems.

JG: Or any wider events that you suddenly had to respond to, for example, a high profile child protection case or a failing authority? Something you suddenly had to respond to.

TL: Yes. I mean that would happen often, although I think I only did one statement. But in fact in my case it was more things that were on our agenda. So we were launching our social work reform review. We were reporting on our adoption reform. So it was fairly well managed by us. It was on the schools side where there were urgent questions and things like that which Michael Gove then had to address, which I think he always did very well because he is very good at the dispatch box and very well briefed.

So I don't think we had any major panics within the DfE actually in our time there, partly because I think we were on top of most of the things that were going on.

JG: That leads nicely on to our next question, which is what do you feel was your greatest achievement in office?

TL: I think, well in terms of policy stuff, without a doubt the child sexual exploitation action plan, which we launched in November 2011 before CSE [child sexual exploitation] was on the radar. It was in October 2012, a few weeks after I left office that the Jimmy Saville scandal broke and that opened the floodgates for CSE and now everybody has heard of child sexual exploitation – from Jimmy Saville to the Church of England to children's homes to Cyril Smith or whatever now. Back in 2011 it was not on the radar.

And we just had the first prosecutions for one of these Pakistani gangs operating in Derby, which had actually got to court and they'd been prosecuted and it hit the headlines. And there was one charity in particular working in Derby whose very tenacious head had challenged the police and the local councils who were effectively sweeping it under the carpet. And because it was culturally sensitive, didn't want to rock the boat. And it was because of her that actually the thing did come to court and low and behold. So she came to see me. In fact I had lunch with her this week. And we went to see James Brokenshire who was my counterpart at the Home Office, and together we realised that we had a problem with child sexual exploitation.

I set up a very big working party including six ministers, cross-cutting, and then particularly with the help of Barnardo's and The Times who ran a campaign on this, we launched our CSE action plan back in November 2011. Some of the things we recommended in that undoubtedly have saved a lot of kids from falling into the hands of some of these people and are part of the fight back against the whole tsunami of child exploitation which has now come out, historic and contemporary. So that was a really good bit of which I'm most proud. And it was driven because we recognised it was a problem. And too many people in authority and the various agencies had for political correctness reasons, for all sorts of reasons, sort of been in denial about it. So that's the biggest single thing, the most relevant thing today as well.

JG: And you've already mentioned the importance of joint working, but what factors would you highlight as being really critical to that success?

TL: On joint working?

JG: On bringing the child exploitation plan together.

TL: Okay. It was by being cross-departmental and cross-governmental on that. And again joined-up government is a much used but much under-practised phrase. And my experience in government was it doesn't really happen. And the early experience of this was on the early intervention grant which we devised in the Department for Education and was all about early intervention in terms of education, in terms of mental health, in terms of benefits, criminality and everything like that. So it's clearly not just the responsibility of the Department for Education. And we were coming up with an awful lot of resistance of 'Well Minister, that's not the way we do it here', or 'That will be a problem', blah, blah, blah.

So in the end Sarah Teather and I rang up half a dozen of our colleagues on their mobile phones and said, 'Are you free for supper this evening?' Six or seven ministers from DWP [Department for Work and Pensions], from housing, from [the Department of] Health, and us from Education got together and we all agreed what we wanted to do and we went back to our departments the following day and said to our officials this is how we're going to do it. To which there was a 'We can't do that, that's not the way to do that', 'Well we've agreed it'. So cutting through the bureaucracy was really important.

And again, people you've been in Parliament with for years and years, worked easily alongside in opposition, if you wanted to arrange something with them you had to go through the diarising meetings, and have officials there, it was a complete nonsense. And so it's this silo operation once you're in a... you feel very isolated as a minister. You have to ask your colleagues what is going on in the House of

Commons. And you have to ask your colleagues what's going on in other departments and you actually feel as a minister very detached. I know much more as a back-bencher about what's going on in a government department than I ever did as a minister, which is slightly ironic.

So my approach to things such as the child sexual exploitation plan which was clearly not going to be solved within the Department for Education was to get the Attorney General, to give him credit, he came to meetings, the Home Office and all these other departments together and got the commitment of ministers to attend meetings or be absolutely briefed on what we needed to do and to have their input. And undoubtedly that made it easier to produce an action plan that would lead to action rather than just be a document gathering dust on the shelf.

And the other thing I set up was the youth action group. And we were approached by a couple of the bigger children's charities starting with The Prince's Trust and Barnardo's where they wanted to have some direct input into government policy on youth issues. So I set up a youth action group, which consisted I think of eight ministers and half a dozen children's charities with Martina Milburn the head of The Prince's Trust and Anne Marie Carrie when she was head of Barnardo's – so some quite high-powered people. And we would meet every couple of months and the children's charities would put forward issues where things had hit a long jam, mostly because it was getting tossed around from one department to another. And so we would be there as ministers with our lead officials so we could say something like there was a problem about housing benefit for children in care. That's a responsibility of the Department for Education, responsible for the children in care, DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government] responsible for housing, and DWP responsible for benefits. So basically we're able to set out the problem and then I would task DfE, the DWP minister who was there and DCLG to come up with a joint response as to how we could sort out that log jam and we did.

So a really practical forum for sorting out cross-departmental problems. And the only reason, and I think it's long since collapsed after I left, but the reason it works is because ministers attended it. I never had fewer than half of the ministers there attending it. So it had real political weight behind it. And when governments have tried that in the past, they did it in things like environmental issues. I mean the Blair government set up a green committee made up of ministers from each department to try and green government. Yet in most cases they sent along officials in their place so it never, or it was the most junior minister, because it was seen as a bit of a pain. Whereas this was driven by ministers and they attended it and took it seriously and that made a difference to getting some of those things sorted.

NH: Just briefly, you mentioned earlier the Secretary of State and his special advisers. I'm just wondering how you managed your relationship with the Secretary of State, how you kept each other informed, that sort of thing?

TL: Badly. And that was part of the problem we had within the Department for Education, that because, for all sorts of reasons... But Michael Gove was absolutely focused on the schools reforms, lacked focus for whatever reason on children and social care and particularly on youth services for which he had no interest, which was difficult because youth policy was under fire and under attack, hugely subject to cuts at local authority level.

We had KIT meetings, keeping in touch meetings, which started off well. So every week or so each minister would have an hour KIT meeting. I'm afraid in my case that fizzled out. So it was increasingly difficult to actually get time to sit down with the Secretary of State to say this is what I need to be able to do or whatever. And that was hugely damaging. And it's really, really important that ministers can get proper one-to-one access, preferably in some cases without officials there at all. Whereas we would have a weekly Monday lunchtime meeting for all the ministers, all the PPS's [Parliamentary Private Secretaries], the special advisers, the Perm Sec and the DGs would be there. But it was rather going through the motions. You know, this is the agenda for the... but you couldn't really thrash out any difficult, sensitive or political issues at that. So to put it diplomatically, I had an uneasy relationship with the Secretary of State, near the end of my tenure, which was not healthy or helpful. The fault for that, we won't go into, but that's how it ended.

NH: Is there anything else you found particularly frustrating about being a minister?

TL: The reluctance of officials to tell you the truth or give you their opinion and I constantly had to challenge officials to say to them, 'Right, tell me why I'm wrong'. And again you've got a slightly artificial relationship you've got there. When you're with close working colleagues, you are all working for the good of that firm, if you're working for a business. So absolutely the survival and the profitability or whatever that business is in all your joint interests. So hopefully you can be rather frank in terms of what's being cocked up or what you need to do.

So when you have meetings with officials and you say, 'Now this is what I'm thinking of doing', 'I'd quite like to do that', 'I think we've got a problem there, so this is what I'm thinking about'. When you get the answer, 'Well, that's all very interesting Minister', usually the stock phrase was 'That's very brave minister' or something like that. What you really wanted them to say was, 'Well, that's very interesting Minister but that's complete crap' or 'That's a ridiculous idea' because this would have that effect or whatever. And I would love it if that's what they said to me. And then we could have an argument. So I had to justify my approach and they could challenge based on their experience. Now you could only do that if, one, you've got a good working relationship with your officials and you've got officials who have got knowledge and experience in their areas. And we were losing quite a lot of good officials as well. So when you've got somebody who has only been in the department for six months or somebody who has only been dealing with an option for five minutes, they haven't got the confidence or the expertise to challenge you anyway, which is a weakness and you need to be challenged.

I came up with some quite wacky ideas from time to time. And I wanted them to be knocked down or for me to be able to argue robustly back. And I had some officials with whom I had a good working relationship where we were just about getting to the stage where they would say 'That's a rather stupid idea isn't Minister', which was great. And then we would have a drink and a few more jelly babies and we would see who came out best able to justify their position. There is an inbuilt reluctance of civil servants to do that. And we need to do that because we're all trying to achieve the same goal. They may have completely different notions and politics or whatever, that's not the point. The point is that we need to be able to have a full and frank conversation and come up with something which is doable in the eyes of most people who have got an interest and a stake in doing that. And that was my most frustrating experience.

We tended to have happy hour in my office. So the first thing I did was to install a fridge full of bottles of stuff. And so when I had particularly tricky meetings with officials or officials I wanted to pump for a bit more information, I would invite them after 6 o'clock. We'd open a bottle and we had a few drinks. And we tended to get quite a lot of work done as well. It's not what I'm recommending that as an official policy for alcoholism within the... but actually it was that slightly more relaxed dynamic between a minister and officials which was actually quite constructive and helpful.

I mean my first month there I got into the lift and some other fairly young official got into the lift. And he came up to me and said, 'I don't know if I'm allowed to speak to you like this but I just wanted to mention something'. I said, 'Why the hell not?' He just had some suggestion for some area I was involved in which was fantastic. But this sort of timidity that you mustn't approach the minister, it's sort of like the royals, you wait until you are spoken to. But this was the mentality within some of those departments.

NH: Final couple of questions. How would you define an effective minister based on all of your experiences?

TL: Well I think the most effective ministers, this is me sort of pushing my own case here, are, you've got a knowledge of your brief and that gives you the confidence to push forward on your agenda. That you are prepared to challenge, and more importantly be challenged, by officials if you can get them to challenge you. That you go out and get real world experience because you are in a hermitically-sealed bubble in the Department for Education or in the Houses of Parliament. And I said the best experiences and the best information and advice I got was going out in a tower block in Stockport alongside a social worker or sitting down and having a sandwich with a group of kids who had been through terrible

experiences, sexual abuse or been in care or whatever. And by making sure that your officials have got some experience on which to base what they're doing as well.

All the stuff about how you perform in Parliament. I think if you are honest and open with Parliament then they will respect you. And I hope I had a pretty good reputation as a children's minister because I knew my brief and was very open to people who wanted to come and question things and make suggestions across the whole House. And certainly with something like children and social care there's no need to be terribly partisan. And I think some ministers find the need to be very partisan which doesn't help as well and also puts your civil servants in a difficult position sometimes as well. And I was always very sensitive to where we were appearing to use civil servants for party political purposes and I was always exceedingly strict on that. I would not expect civil servants to be pushing the political agenda.

NH: And is there anything else that we haven't covered that you would like to add?

TL: That's probably quite a lot we've covered.

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