

Ministers reflect

David Laws



March 2016

David Laws

Biographical details

Electoral history

2001-2015: Member of Parliament for Yeovil

Parliamentary career

2012-2015: Minister of State for Education; Minister of State for the Cabinet Office

2010 (May): Chief Secretary to the Treasury

2007-2010: Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families

2005-2007: Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

2002-2005: Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury

David Laws (DL) was interviewed by Jen Gold (JG) and Peter Riddell (PR) on 4th February for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project

Peter Riddell (PR): In your earlier book you say you were very prepared for negotiations and you had thought about forming a coalition in opposition, but how prepared were you for being a minister?

David Laws (DL): I think not formally well prepared at all, because firstly nobody had really talked to us about what being a minister meant in any structured way and of course our party had low expectations about being in government because of our size in the House of Commons.

So I think our preparations were defective in two ways: one, how, simply, do you operate as a minister? I remember turning up at the Treasury on the first or second day in the job and just sitting in the office and being given various briefing papers by officials and sensing things going into my diary, but actually being conscious that nobody was saying, 'Well, what do you want us to do and how do you want us to run this?' And I remember thinking, 'If I just don't impose any order on this at all, will the Civil Service just run me?' They'll fill up my box with various things and probably fill my diary with various other things, but nobody was asking me what my priorities were or what I wanted to do or how to run things.

So I realised fairly rapidly you have to do that yourself and you can do it and people will more or less dance to your tune. It is obviously slightly different if you are not the Secretary of State because you also have to figure out how what your work agenda is... is going to fit in with what they want to do. I suppose therefore we weren't prepared in the sense of 'what do ministers do, how do they structure things, how does government work'.

But also our engagement with the Civil Service about policy priorities had been at a fairly broad level. I think that there had been talks opened up, maybe a year before the 2010 election, with the Civil Service on what our priorities were and helping the Civil Service to understand that so that we could deliver a government. But I don't think... I mean, we'd only really gone into any detail about the pupil premium. And we hadn't gone through in the way that I think a serious government-in-waiting would do the top ten policy areas and thought about how you'd deliver those over a period of time, what legislation would be required and everything. We just talked with the Permanent Secretary and a couple of officials about the pupil premium and about what we wanted to achieve which then enabled them, I think, to go off and do some preparatory work. But it was a very limited area of policy that we'd covered, and we hadn't covered it to the depth that we would have done if we'd been a party of 250 MPs really expecting to form a majority government. So, I think in those senses, we'd thought much more about the process of delivering a coalition agreement and less about what would come afterwards.

PR: When you did arrive in the Treasury, you mentioned having the briefing papers. What support was available? Did your Private Secretary, or did anyone like [the Permanent Secretary] or anyone like that say, 'Well, this is what the powers of a Chief Secretary are?'

DL: No. I don't think so. I don't think that was ever said. And I can't remember when I saw Nick [Clegg] about any serious discussion, it was probably a week or two in and I suspect that most of the senior Civil Service were probably buzzing around the Chancellor [of the Exchequer] and also trying to figure out what a Chief Secretary did and didn't do.

Danny [Alexander, Laws' successor] told me after our time in government, when I was talking to him about my book, that when he first became Chief Secretary, or shortly afterwards, [he] was briefed by a civil servant about an upcoming budget and saying, 'Gosh, it's so refreshing to be able to discuss this openly with you, because when Gordon Brown was Chancellor, we on one occasion had to go through a full scorecard with the then Chief Secretary because Gordon wasn't prepared for them to know what was in the budget because this person was regarded as a Blair plant, and so we literally had to pretend what was in the budget and lie to the Chief Secretary [laughs].

4 Ministers reflect

So even more with the Coalition, I think people didn't quite know how a coalition minister would fit in and what powers they would have. So given that I had to in my limited time there do a spending review and start the next serious spending review, I do remember having to power up that process myself and say, 'Right, this is what we are going to do and I want to see the policy teams in this area and that area and the other area', and most of what therefore went on seemed to be me telling people what I was going to be doing, rather than the Civil Service having put in place a lot of structures. In fairness to them, they had done the background work on the...

PR: Because they'd been alerted by George [Osborne, the Chancellor] and by Rupert Harrison [Osborne's then special adviser] before the election on the in-year cuts?

DL: Yeah, on the in-year cuts it was clear that they had prepared a Conservative plan which went through all departments and estimated what they would be. And I remember having to amend that a bit to reflect the fact that we wanted to protect the education budget in a way that the Tories weren't planning to do, so there was a sort of Tory plan for the six billion cuts that we changed a bit, but actually that informed quite a lot of that first spending round. But I don't think that they were expecting me, or planning for me, to drive these processes. It needed me to actually say that I was going to and then once I made that clear they fitted around that.

There was also obviously a brief for incoming ministers on the fiscal challenge, which I think both the Chancellor and I saw at the same time on day one or day two, which said this is how much red ink there is, these are the three different options, things you might want to do, and the strengths and weaknesses of each option and everything. And clearly they did want feedback on that because it gave them a sense of what political appetite there was on both sides of the Coalition for doing big-picture fiscal stuff.

PR: And you had the Liam Byrne note... [reference to note left by Laws' predecessor: 'I'm afraid there's no money.'].]

DL: And I had Liam Byrne's note, yes, which was on day two or something.

PR: Had your previous experience in the world of banking given you any help to do your job? Apart from being numerate and financially literate, had the fact you had worked in a big investment bank helped you understand organisations and all that? Because a lot of Lib Dem ministers basically had been the equivalent of small traders.

DL: I think it did help a bit in terms of knowing what large organisations are like. Being aware of the politics of them, not just party political politics, but also I think probably in terms of confidence in the sense that if you've been operating in a big, large organisation and it's one that is reputable, and you are used to dealing with management reporting and everything, it gives you a greater confidence to operate.

I'd learnt in my first employer to be willing to ask stupid questions of people and not assume that those questions were embarrassing or necessarily stupid, and learnt that usually you discover after then asking the supplementaries, that they're definitely not stupid because the people you ask don't know the answers to them. So, I think working [at] places like JP Morgan [the bank] had given me a confidence about large organisations and about being willing to challenge and ask stupid questions from day one.

PR: Let's roll forward two years. You come back into office, how did you approach that differently given your brief experience in May 2010? Did that lead you to behave differently as a new minister? You were double-hatting of course in that period.

DL: Yeah, I don't remember coming back into government being... I mean going into government wasn't... I'm not suggesting it was frightening [in 2010] or that I was sitting at my desk shivering on the first day, but I somehow found coming back into government much more routine and less surprising, even with only a relatively short period of time [spent in office] in 2010.

I don't remember thinking, 'What am I supposed to be doing?' I was coming into a government that was already running, already had a policy agenda, that wasn't having to start from scratch and I don't remember being in the slightest bit reticent about determining what my priorities were. And I asked Michael Gove [then Education Secretary] [if I could] lead in the department under him in the areas that I was passionate about and more informed about so I was automatically taking on things that I knew quite a bit about, [where] I knew what I wanted to do broadly speaking.

PR: That's an interesting point because [as] Chief Secretary it is rather different from saying, 'I want to do this, this and this'. You're by definition co-ordinating and dealing responsibility. In [the Department for] Education you went in thinking, even though you were two and a bit years half way through Parliament nearly, you had an agenda you wanted to pursue?

DL: Yes, I think I did on things like pupil premium, on accountability, not all bits of which I managed to agree with Michael Gove, some of them inevitably I didn't. But I knew what I wanted to do and I knew which policy areas I wanted to focus on. I couldn't say in terms of some of the things that we ended up doing in those policy areas, what would be smaller details, like reforming the funding of new school places and having a school rebuilding programme, that I knew from day one what methodologies I wanted to apply and precisely how much money I wanted to spend on things. But I knew what areas I wanted to focus on and which policies I particularly wanted to prioritise.

Jen Gold [JG]: In terms of you double-hatting at DfE [Department for Education] and the Cabinet Office, how did your role actually play out in reality?

DL: It ended up being pretty much 50/50. I was a bit reticent about it having a double-hatted role when I took it on. I remember saying to Nick Clegg, 'I'm not sure this will really work, two jobs.' And I remember him saying, 'Well how many jobs do you think I have to do!' And it was not an optional type of thing.

Actually to my amazement, the Civil Service made it work extremely well because I had two private offices that coordinated with each other well [and] made sure that I wasn't going backwards and forwards ten times a day.

I largely used to start off the day in the Cabinet Office. A lot of Nick Clegg's regular meetings were in the morning period and then generally speaking I used to go to the department at about one o'clock and spend the second half of the day or the middle third of the day in the DfE. So it ended up that probably half my time was spent focusing on education and half was spent focussing on issues that basically... Danny [Alexander] and I divided the policy areas between ourselves, things that he was covering anyway through the Treasury or national security issues that he and Nick Clegg were well-sighted on anyway. And then all the other things came to me, which were largely domestic policy stuff, outside the Treasury, all of it, so it was sort of health policy, immigration, Home Office, local government. It was all the stuff that wasn't directly Treasury and not defence and foreign affairs. The Cabinet Office stuff focused on areas of disagreement or areas where there were big new policy things that needed a lot of scrutiny. By me doing it, it meant that it didn't take as much time of Nick's as it would need to otherwise.

JG: You obviously had a range of other responsibilities – constituency, spending time in Parliament as well as two departments, media and other things as well. Did you find that a particular challenge and that certain elements of the role that were really pressed?

DL: No. It meant doing very long days, which I suppose most people in government do. I remember once looking at the diary in the Cabinet meeting of one of the Secretary of State for the devolved areas [who was] sitting next to me and looking at her diary that had about four meetings in a day, clearly a one and a half hour lunch and thinking, 'Blimey, not everybody is doing quite what I have to do because of the two jobs!' Not that I resented it because it was the most extraordinary opportunity, but it did mean packing in a lot to the day.

6 Ministers reflect

But a) the Civil Service people used the time very efficiently and b) what I squeezed out of doing were things like school visits, which are useful and interesting, but they are a diminishing return in terms of time spent. I avoided generally doing a lot of external-facing media, out on the road stuff and generally, I avoided seeing the people that I needed to see just for the sake of seeing them and ticking them off, [people] who wanted to say they'd seen a minister.

Most of the meetings I had were very practical, policy-related, 'need for a decision'-type meetings, and the Civil Service shrank those to the minimum time necessary and whipped the meetings through at an extraordinary pace. So, I think it shows that you can use the time more productively provided you accept that that does mean that you give up on some of the sort of public relations, media stuff and be out visiting. That suited me fine in terms of my interest, although it did sort of mean that there was more burden on people like Nick for doing all the communication side of some of these things.

PR: And what about the constituency?

DL: The constituency I still, I mean, I basically was there all Fridays, most Saturdays and getting vast amounts of constituency correspondence coming up every day which I could deal with in the evenings, maybe an hour every day in the evening was constituency correspondence. But compared probably with some Tory ministers – I remember George [Osborne] being amazed at the beginning of the Parliament when I said I was going to be going back to Yeovil every Friday and it hadn't occurred to him at all that he could visit his constituency at all in a week. But I can't think of many weeks where I wasn't there on a Friday and a Saturday.

PR: What about the House [of Commons]? Because one of the interesting issues that has come up in [our] interviews are the very varying amounts of time spent in the Commons.

DL: Yes. I was blessed in a sense by Michael [Gove]'s determination not to have education bills, even when the Prime Minister wanted them and even when he tried to push them down on us from the top. Michael's view was he had got all the legislation he needed and that we should focus on delivery. He didn't want bills just to put in the Queen's Speech to say that we were doing something. And I think he probably didn't want to risk parliamentary scrutiny and Lords problems.

So that meant that for my entire time there, I didn't have to lead on any bill issue in three years, which is probably quite unusual for a minister. And in the Cabinet Office, I wasn't in a real Cabinet Office job either as you can understand it was a kind of a without-portfolio-type thing.

So the only times that I needed to go to the House were to vote, and I got a bit more latitude than other MPs in not having to go to all votes [as I had] two jobs. [I had] to do DfE questions, which is obviously a very light commitment, and to do select committee appearances, which again, I can't remember how many I did – even in almost three years I probably only went before the select committee four or five times.

So I found the Parliament thing quite a light commitment and can understand why for some people in government, Parliament is almost... I mean, civil servants find it amazing to go there and nice to go there to see it, because in some senses it can feel to some people as a quaint sort of second order, different planet type of thing. When you are in Parliament, you think the world is revolving around you, but when you are in departments, you think that Parliament is just this irritating thing that you have to go to occasionally to vote and be accountable.

But I had to spend very little time there and that was a blessing because being locked in committees looking at bills for months on end could really have taken up a lot of time. And it would have meant it was quite difficult [because] if it had been a big bill, I'd have had to do it. The sheer time of preparing for it and everything, with people trying to trip you up, would have meant that doing the two jobs that I was doing would have suddenly become much more difficult.

Oh, by the way, obviously I had to do adjournment debates, but again even though they would come up more regularly than all the other things, they were still quite low-time pressure. And because you are not

being scrutinised, because you can control them much more than you control a bill, the amount of time you have to invest in preparation is actually quite small.

PR: What about keeping in touch with your colleagues? I know you had regular meetings with the Cabinet ministers, the Lib Dem ministers would meet, did you feel you were in danger of losing touch with some of them?

DL: Funnily enough, the people who I probably most lost touch with were... well, the people I saw most were Nick and Danny, because the three of us met quite regularly in different meetings, multiple times a week.

We had a parliamentary party meeting every week that we were all supposed to go to. It was a three-line whip and Nick always went, I think. So you did sort of remain in touch with backbenchers, although they didn't approach us as much as I expected. I expected our own MPs to be working ministers a bit harder for their own constituency stuff. I was surprised that they didn't.

The people in a sense that we had surprisingly little contact with were the other ministers, including some of the other Cabinet ministers. We had a once a week, other than the Cabinet, we had a Lib Dem Cabinet ministers meeting, followed immediately by a Lib Dem ministers meeting. But our other ministers, other than the three of us [Clegg, Alexander and Laws], I didn't see all that often. The connections, the sense of being a team, wasn't as great as it might have been.

JG: We've been very interested in people's approach to decision making. I just wondered whether you could talk us through an occasion when an unexpected event or crisis hit any of the departments that you worked in and how you went about dealing with that?

DL: An unexpected event or crisis, do you mean a sort of external rather than from the other side of the Coalition?

PR: Well, both. It's like in education when there's an exam crisis or whatever.

DL: The point is driving towards...

JG: Your approach to decision making, crisis management, having to respond rapidly to something.

DL: It was rare that there were things that suddenly came out of the blue and dropped on our head. Occasionally, I don't know whether this is what you mean, but there might be some sort of report out, leaked report, about a free school doing terribly or something.

I can't remember many that applied to my area where there were sort of crisis-type things, or things that could have gone wrong. Usually, you knew about them for a while and you may be working to extinguish the thing before it became public. So, pressures on school places and stuff like that - we were aware at one stage that there were some parts of the country that were not meeting their statutory duty to give a school place to all children, but it wasn't public, so we had time to sort it out. A free school thing I do remember coming out of the blue at short notice and having to deal with that in the House and it wasn't my lead area, but the minister concerned was away.

Bear in mind that my Cabinet Office job was not as the minister in charge of each of these areas, I was therefore tending to deal with problems in getting the Coalition aligned rather than external crises. And on the education side, the things that went right and wrong tended to emerge over time, unless they were coalition problems. So there might be... there were obviously quite a lot of points of tension in the Coalition between both sides, over things that suddenly would drop out of the sky, and usually it was obvious what you were happy about or unhappy about and it was a question of dealing with it in the department or trying to deal with it through either the Treasury or through Nick. Sorry, that doesn't sound like a very helpful answer.

8 Ministers reflect

JG: No, that's fine. So in terms of the other end of the spectrum, looking back, what do you feel was your greatest achievement in office, something you are particularly proud of?

DL: I think it was probably, the one I would say as a party in education was the pupil premium, but I didn't start that off because I started it in opposition, helped to make sure it was funded properly in government, but wasn't the minister who was first within the DfE leading off on it, that was Sarah [Teather]. But I think in terms of what we did in government, from planning for it before the election to the Coalition Agreement to getting it in, getting the pupil premium in, getting the money for it, and getting the accountability around it right, which was as important almost as the money, I think is the greatest achievement, which hopefully will make the biggest impact over time.

The thing that I think that I personally was involved in in the department while I was there, that will make a huge impact even though it sounds like a really boring, dull thing, are the changes we made to accountability for education at secondary and primary which raised the bar for what success looks like at primary and requires many more schools to reach that level.

It also scrapped the Labour target of schools being judged on five good GCSEs including English and Maths, which had created a lot of bad incentives for schools to focus on C/D borderline pupils. We put in place a new attainment, progress-eight target, which is already meaning that millions of children across the country are now taking a different range of subjects because they have to in order to get the accountability scores. So, they are no longer focusing on five, they are focusing on eight, they are focusing more on the EBacc [English Baccalaureate] subjects because you have to have five of those to fill the places.

And also we put much more focus on progress, rather than just a threshold measure which means that if you are a school and you've got loads of very low performing pupils, previously you had no incentive to do anything about their education because if they were only going to go from a G grade to an E grade, you just got no credit. Now if you get a B grade student to an A star, or a G [grade] to a D [grade], you'll get the credit. Also, because you are measuring progress, you are giving incentives to head teachers to teach in challenging schools rather than only giving them an incentive to go to cosy schools that are going to get the five good GCSE targets.

So that sounds like a really boring thing, but in terms of schools running around doing different things, pupils taking different subjects, people having an incentive to teach in different schools, actually it's a massive driver of real change on the ground.

PR: Could I lead on from that in terms of machinery to achieve it. It is fine for you, a quarter of a mile away, to say this is what we're going to do. What about the actual machinery to achieve that? Previous education ministers have struggled to find the levers of power in the Civil Service [and wider education system] – what we now call implementation, delivery, whatever you like to call it, how did you find all that worked?

DL: It worked pretty well. It required a sense of what was wrong which was shared on both sides of the Coalition. It required good civil servants to produce options, and good special advisers to lead the debate challenging both civil servants who are often not very good at doing more than following steers and aren't used to the idea that they are supposed to be thinking themselves. So it required some good special advisers who both worked with the civil servants to give them confidence and also challenged us as ministers to look at what might be wrong about our proposals.

It required working across the Coalition, including with Michael's special advisers to make them confident in what we were doing, particularly as some of that meant focusing more on progress rather than raw attainment, which is something that they were naturally sceptical about. And it meant resolving issues about whether or not everybody was going to have to do the EBacc subjects or whether we could create a more flexible set of incentives that would mean that people had to do five EBacc subjects, but they didn't have to do every single bucket of them and everything. So there were quite a few agreements to reach on that.

Once we'd agreed it in the DfE, it was easy to get agreement with Nick Clegg and David Cameron. And then the levers in this area were easier because they are literally accountability things that you can change. The amazing thing you realise is that we've created now, particularly in the schools system, an amazingly responsive system where the stakes are so high for people missing the accountability things that with frightening speed, once you change one of these things, and you've then got Ofsted [school inspection and regulation service] and the department chasing the schools down to see how they've replied, within almost 24 hours of making an announcement, you've got head teachers writing to parents saying, 'Next year you're going to have to study a totally different range of subjects.' Whereas in some areas, you've pulled a lever and there's nothing joined to it; school accountability things and school funding things, they have a very immediate effect and if you get them wrong, that can be bad and if you get it right, that's good.

PR: Two things you mention there, one was special advisers...

DL: Yes, which I'm a big fan of...

PR: How did it work? Michael had some fairly strong special advisers.

DL: It worked well I think. I mean we had a special adviser who was Nick's special adviser who worked in the department, Matt Sanders. He was very good, very bright, knew a lot about policy, but who also understood the political dynamics quite well but didn't throw fuel on the fire. So, [he] generally looked at things in terms of guarding our interest, but also getting things done and knowing Michael's people and not trying to fall out with them.

And then Michael allowed me to employ two other advisers who were not my special advisers, but I think they were in this policy adviser category. But they were both people he felt confident about the seriousness of, one of whom was Tim Leunig who worked at Centre Forum, and Michael already knew him, and he's a Liberal Democrat, but he's a very independent-minded Liberal Democrat. He became Chief Statistician at DfE. Then another guy from here called Chris Paterson who went in, replaced him. Michael trusted both of them, and thought they were good people.

So, they then used to work with me more closely than Nick's special adviser did who, to be honest, ended up being distracted quite a lot by the politics of things and managing the more sensitive stuff. But they worked completely in a purer sense on policy. They were two really good strong people. They knew my mind and were therefore able to work for me when I wasn't in the department. They were respected by civil servants. They provided challenge to me as well as support. They gave confidence to the civil servants not just to be serving up things they thought that ministers wanted. They played a very valuable role in taking things forward when we weren't around, in being able to push back against us when our ideas weren't very good, [and] give confidence to the civil servants.

Then, I suppose when I was there, the only significant policy person that we had to work with on Michael's side was Dom Cummings because Henry de Zoete was more on the press side of it and Sam [Freedman] sadly had already gone; [he] went shortly after I arrived and was a very good person who would have been good to work with.

Dom could be a complete pain in the arse and was a difficult person in some ways, but he also clearly was very serious about policy stuff and actually didn't just think things through as a superficial, 'will this be a good headline' way. In fact, his criticism of the rest of the Government was [that] he thought they spent too much time doing that. So he did engage in quite a serious way, and he bizarrely ended up with quite a good relationship with Tim Leunig. You couldn't think of more different people, but they kind of saw in each other a seriousness about the policy work they were doing and so, when occasionally there were potential fall-outs or difficult issues to resolve like the accountability stuff that I talked about and GCSE reform, actually they worked behind the scenes between them, reflecting their different bosses' views. Tim more mine even though he didn't work directly for me in a formal sense, and Michael's through Dom. And if they were both onside for something and had fixed it, then it was likely that both of us would agree it as well. So they were hugely important.

PR: What we've now got is extended ministerial offices being created, which is a combination of experts, many departments have them. So there's a kind of blurring of special adviser category, isn't there?

DL: I think this depends hugely on who the people are who are recruited, and what the mindset of any secretary of state is. There clearly is a very big risk that if you've got the wrong Secretary of State who hires the wrong people, who are either aren't very good or are just doing a highly political job, that could be both a missed opportunity and also a risk that the Civil Service then gets the message that they just have to serve up any old tosh that is going to be politically acceptable.

Whereas we didn't have people like that and also, because we were in coalition over everything, there was a serious dialogue between two parties that both had quite a lot of power and influence to get things done, where each needed the other to progress things. So that meant that there were real arguments and debates over policy in the centre, which meant that bad arguments could be tested and were more likely to be thrown out. Whereas if you got the wrong set of people in those roles and they see things in a more political way, then the risk is that instead of the Civil Service being more productively connected into ministers because they are actually understanding the agenda and unafraid of offering policy advice, the risk is that with bad special advisers or people who are too politicised, that they might even more reinforce to civil servants a need to serve up the policy advice that they think is wanted rather than good policy advice. You could see already in government that was a serious risk that actually, the Civil Service also wasn't operating as some sort of machine that had an agenda that it was trying to stamp on ministers. Too often my concern was that it was too passive in the face of a general ministerial direction and therefore afraid of serving up things that it didn't think would be welcome.

PR: Because the term special adviser is so sensitive, the perfectly legitimate recruitment of people who are recruited by a minister has to be put under a different category – policy adviser or extended ministerial office – when it might be more honest to describe them as special advisers given their tenure is the one of ministers, but because no one wants to go above 115 or 120 special advisers, even in the Coalition; it creates a bit of hypocrisy, to be honest.

DL: Yes, it does. It was simply circumventing a number and everything. I mean, I think you can see that there might be a usefulness in distinguishing between communications people and policy people and actually, there could be a legitimate, political interest in how many spin doctors are being recruited and Parliament might want to say, well, do we need 500 people to spin the Government's line each day? Actually, if we'd allowed that cap to get in the way of recruiting people like Tim Leunig and Chris Paterson from here, the Government would have been hugely the poorer for it because there just weren't people who could easily be picked in the department who had that confidence to work with ministers, knowledge of what they wanted, and the ability to kick back and occasionally be quite rude about their ideas.

PR: Before you arrived at Education, there was quite a big change in the Civil Service at the top with David Bell's [former Education Permanent Secretary] departure and some of the director generals. What was your view on the quality of the civil servants you worked with both in the Treasury and then when you went to Education?

DL: My general view was that they were of what I would think as a very high quality given that any organisation is going to have a dispersion and everybody can't be perfect. I would say there was a very high quality. What was missing... I can't really speak for the Treasury because [my] longevity there wasn't great, but what was missing I felt both in the Cabinet Office and in DfE, which I think were both quite strong areas that would generally not have recruitment problems, what was missing were people who you felt were strong enough that they were not only good civil servants and could give good advice on things they were asked for, but who could potentially lead policy debates. Where you could actually say, 'Oh my god, we've got a problem with teacher supply' or, 'We really don't know if the pupil premium is working and whether we are doing enough to get schools to use it sensibly'; if this is my problem, go and bring me back five possible solutions based on international best practice and have a robust

argument with me about which is best where [and] at the end of the day I'll tell you which one we're doing, but where you should feel totally able to bring anything to the table.

I thought that the skills of a lot of the people were in administration and doing standard things and being competent and totally reliable and totally trustworthy. But I was worried if anything that there might be too much inclination to look to ministers always for the solutions rather than bringing possible solutions and options and that, particularly where you had a very strong Secretary of State like Michael with a very strong and opinionated and, at times, difficult special adviser, there was a slight worry in my mind that some of the people had been pushed into an overly compliant mode where they were definitely aware of what was expected and what was in fashion and out of fashion and they were sort of doing whatever they were told. I think you want a system where civil servants are confident enough to bring you ideas, to challenge ministers, to be very honest with them and then ultimately to get on and accept their advice.

JG: We haven't actually interviewed that many former ministers who worked in the centre, partly because many are still in office, but I was wondering if you had any observations on cross-Whitehall working that came from your time in the Cabinet Office?

DL: My cross-Whitehall working was really cross-Whitehall in the sense of bilateral things where there was a new bill coming up, like the Immigration Bill which was going to be controversial or something where we would have to get the people in for that, scrutinise it, have loads of meetings, look at stuff, bat it backwards and forwards because of Oliver Letwin [then Minister for Government Policy] and everything. So, I don't know if it was genuinely cross-Whitehall and I didn't see a lot of cross-Whitehall things that I thought were working brilliantly.

Michael at DfE hated cross-departmental working. It was one of his big emotional, resistant areas and he used to encourage ministers not to be part of cross-departmental initiatives and not to go along to the taskforce meetings and all sorts of other things. He regarded that as just a distraction from getting on with proper work.

PR: You had the odd joint minister didn't you at Education or didn't you?

DL: In DfE, we had a joint minister with BIS [Department for Business, Innovation & Skills]. That's a separate question, I think... and by the way, I approached that more from a coalition angle. I think one of the things that I regret a bit is that we didn't from the word go, have more joint ministers. Because my experience in the DfE, which was the department where we were trying to do a lot, and the Cabinet Office where I still got engaged in quite a lot of things, is [that] I was able to do it pretty well across two departments. So I think we should have employed a lot more, we could have had a joint FCO [Foreign & Commonwealth Office]/ Defence Minister, or at least FCO/DfID [Department for International Development] or something like that. I think we could have covered our coalition bases better. So that's probably a slightly different question.

JG: What would you say you found most frustrating about being a minister?

DL: I don't know. I didn't find a lot of things frustrating. I wasn't average in the sense that I had the massive advantage of having the close contact with Nick and Danny who were the two biggest Lib Dem power sources in the Coalition. So it meant that even though I was a junior minister, if I wanted to get things done, or block things from happening, I could move them – if they were supportive, which they generally were – in the chess-board to move things on.

If I'd been a junior minister without those connections, then I think I would have felt a bit disconnected in terms of policy levers because you're then hugely reliant upon who your Secretary of State is and whether they want to work with you or not. But I didn't have that problem. So the thing I found frustrating bluntly was when there were periods of time where the DfE got a bit dysfunctional and where relations broke down a bit. And so we were spending too much time arguing over things rather than getting on and delivering.

PR: Well, that changed in the last year.

DL: It changed in the last year and that made life a lot easier really in some senses.

PR: What would your advice be to a new minister on how to be effective?

DL: It would firstly be your Institute advice about focusing on one or two things. I think it's very easy to say 'one or two things' and then get stretched all over the place. Even though I knew what my one or two things were, I had to keep on reminding myself of those things, and insisting that there were enough meetings in my diary to keep coming back to them. The Civil Service's natural inclination is to say, 'Well, do you really need these meetings and perhaps we can use the time for something else?' So I think you can't underestimate that you need not only to identify priorities, but then follow through on them and structure your day and your week and your month around that.

And the other thing that I found really useful, but this again might be slightly a coalition thing, is small practical things like the fact that I'd learnt after a while that the most useful thing in my box during the week was the Secretary of State delivery notes in the DfE. There were three notes from the different directorates which, on two sides of A4 paper, summarised every important thing happening in the department and coming up. It's staggering I think, even if you're a secretary of state, or even if you're a minister in the same coalition party as running the department, it's staggering how much you don't know. Partly because there are so many things and partly also because the Civil Service often thinks that it is taking care of things and doesn't always think that everything should be known by ministers. So this delivery note that I used to see once a week on a Saturday, that Michael had obviously got somebody to do, or maybe it existed before, summarised every single thing happening in the department in a very neat way and regularly updated statistics on things. By just reading that, you could keep an eye on stuff or say, 'What the hell's this? Get me a further note on it.' I certainly found that useful for keeping up with what was really going on in the department and discovering what I hadn't been told about, and tracking down things that looked as if they were going off the rails – which sometimes even the minister responsible or the Secretary of State wasn't doing because I suspect that not everything comes across their plate.

PR: You mentioned at the beginning the training sessions and all that. Do you think is it possible to prepare ministers before an election for office, or can it really only be done with proper induction afterwards?

DL: I think it's better done afterwards. Both because before elections people are just focused on winning elections and also party leaders don't want their potential ministers to a) get over-excited about posts that they might then not give them or b) [to get] distracted from campaigning when they don't want them or sometimes don't want particular people put in front of civil servants if they are not confident about them. Sometimes these practicalities are more serious than you would think. So I think probably it's better to do so after.

By the way, one thing that I would have liked to have had on that information thing, which I'd love your Institute [for Government] to get involved in at some stage, I wish I'd made more progress on in government, is that I was struck being in the Cabinet Office, but this would be equally true in [the Department for] Education, how poor the quality of management information was. Absolutely bloody awful. No proper management information that Nick or [David] Cameron saw, unless they saw it and I didn't, that summarised what...when I think of what I saw at JP Morgan or BZW just about, a serious ten-page report. It's easier obviously if you are running just a bank and its P&L [profit & loss] and how much risk you're taking, you can measure those things easily, whereas the Government is trying to do everything.

But the lack of management information that really focused on the things that were most important. The sense it was totally ad hoc, the fact that in DfE, the management information needs to come in A3 sheets that you folded out across your desk and that were so inaccessible and half the information didn't change for six months in a row, it was impossible to deal with it. That was improved a bit towards the end of my time there with Tom Shinner [Director of Strategy at the Department for Education]. I don't

know if you know him, but [he] came in, very good guy. But my sense over the Government as a whole was it was bloody awful. No proper focus...

PR: Yes, we have fought a bit of a campaign on that. It's also true of all the NEDs [Non-Executive Directors]. They are very strong on that. That's one of the most striking things for the NEDs who've come from big businesses. They say the quality of information is just useless.

DL: I don't even know what the Prime Minister gets, but I never saw anything that Nick got that was useful. And a lot of the stuff that was coming from the delivery-type Cabinet Office people was all about problems and it was reactive. There was no 'this is the agenda of the Government' – and of course you needed to update it and change it. There was no 'this is an update of how each week it is monitored – how many new academies, what's the latest data on this, that and the other'.

PR: Also the other thing is on the business-as-usual stuff rather than being purely focused on change. Steve Hilton [former Director of Strategy for David Cameron] was focused on change. Much of government is when you go to the GP or are you getting your pension on time, and things like that – delivering the existing business and I think politicians are more interested in delivering change and in fact, most citizens want existing business done properly.

DL: I remember somebody half-way through the Coalition saying, 'I'm terribly worried about what we're going to do for the next two years, we've delivered most of our policy agenda.' Well, of course we hadn't, we'd got a massive amount of actual delivery [left to do]. Michael's attitude to not creating new problems and new legislation but just actually delivering the existing things was a very healthy one.

PR: But it's the background of politicians [that], in a way, is looking for change. Therefore legislation matters when actually as often you could be improving the existing system, making it more efficient.

DL: I'm sure that has a direct impact in the sense that I don't remember Nick and Cameron – I wouldn't have been so aware obviously with Cameron – but I don't remember them having [those discussions]. If they had stocktakes over things they tended to be something that was a huge, obvious problem blowing up or going off the rails or something, or are we going to deliver exit checks by such and such a date. But the really crucial things about school reform and NHS performance and everything, the quality of even the latest fiscal trends, the quality of information about that was dire. And therefore I don't remember either Nick or the Prime Minister properly having what I suspect Blair might have been better at which is regular stocktakes.

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: 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 2016

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