

Ministers reflect

Kenneth Clarke

March 2016



Kenneth Clarke – biographical details

Electoral History

1970-present: Member of Parliament for Rushcliffe

Parliamentary Career

2012-2014: Minister without Portfolio

2010-2012: Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice

2009-2010: Shadow Business Secretary

1993-1997: Chancellor of the Exchequer

1992-1993: Home Secretary

1990-1992: Secretary of State for Education and Science

1988-1990: Secretary of State for Health

1987-1988: Minister of State for Trade and Industry

1985-1987: Paymaster General and Secretary of State for Employment

1982-1985: Minister of State for Health

1980-1982: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport

1979-1980: Parliamentary Secretary for Transport

Kenneth Clarke (KC) was interviewed by Nicola Hughes (NH) and Peter Riddell (PR) on 8th February 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project

Kenneth Clarke (KC): I have always thought that no two ministers do it the same way. And I don't know that, because apart from the secretaries of state I worked under as a junior minister, I have never been in a department to see how other secretaries of state work.

When I was first appointed, my first parliamentary secretary job, there was no induction or anything. I was just told by the prime minister that she wanted me to go and be Parliamentary Secretary for Transport and discovered that the Secretary of State was an old mate of mine from Cambridge. And the two of us were the only ministers in the department. Apart from anything else, no one in Downing Street could tell me where the department was, let alone give me any other guidance as to what I was supposed to do.

Having found it was in Marsham Street Towers I turned up, rather nervously, and said, 'I have just been made a minister here' and a guy came up and said he was my private secretary. And I had no idea what a private secretary was. It turned out well, I got on very well with him.

Norman [Fowler, then Transport Secretary] and I did work together closely, because we were both so green. He had never been a minister before, either. I at least had been in the whips office. But we just worked, as far as day-to-day working was concerned, we worked it out as we went along. And we actually adopted slightly different approaches to it. He was very cautious at first and I, flushed with youthful confidence, even on transport policy, knew all the answers [and] was far more eager to get on with it. And we held a lot of meetings together with the officials, Secretary of State and Parliamentary Secretary, which I never did again. I have never known a secretary of state and a junior minister do so many meetings actually together as a kind of team — with him as the boss but, you know, a couple of old mates working out that we have got a whole department to run.

I suppose from then on, in my much reshuffled career, into about eight or nine departments, I slowly developed my own method of working. I certainly got more and more quirky and developed it further. And eventually, I think, as Secretary of State, I ran it as a kind of debating society. I liked to have the meetings, which dominate your ministerial day, but liked to encourage a lot of discussion, because that clarifies one's own mind. I rather impulsively came to decisions. I have never had any trouble with decision making, but I would then allow a lot of debate and then those decisions would get modified and I didn't mind if it was challenged by officials in discussions.

Peter Riddell (PR): Therefore, was it more Socratic rather than on paper?

KC: Well, there was an awful lot of paper and I did do the red boxes, because the big decisions, often, you made in the middle of the night, doing red box papers. But I, genuinely, did find it helpful to supplement that with at least one meeting. Not a lot of meetings but at least one meeting, where you could thrash it out. I could give my reaction to the paper if there was time, say what I was minded to do, listen to what the reaction was.

The other thing is that the departments were very different from each other in those days. No two government departments were run in the same way and some of them did depend on the working methods of the permanent secretary, if you happened to go somewhere where there was a powerful permanent secretary. But they each had their own culture and could have quite a different feel, when you went in.

Take an extreme example, the Treasury was the best department I ever worked in because the intellectual quality of the people was undoubtedly higher, almost universally across all the officials, than any other I was in. I could run it like a debating society, because the then permanent secretary encouraged it, Terry Burns, who hadn't started as a civil servant either. But what I liked about it was you could get a group of officials around the table and they would all join in and the most junior guy at the

table, just out of school I used to say, no doubt just come out of university with a reasonably good degree, he or she would argue with the permanent secretary, or me, with the same vigour as anybody else. And we would all clarify where we would go. And it was a very stimulating atmosphere, which I used to, compare with something like a high table at an Oxbridge College. The mood, I picked up from it, was similar. I used to say they were just like an Oxbridge College – frightfully bright and not one of them capable of running anything. Not actually running anything, but they had policies and ideas – they were brilliant.

The Home Office was a total contrast. That was staid and traditional and very hierarchical. You had to be a very senior official indeed to be ever allowed to attend a meeting with the secretary of state. And the main aim of the senior officials was to make sure that the secretary of state, the home secretary, didn't do anything very rapidly. And if you agreed to do anything, they would go slowly. Advice to the home secretary, clear policy advice, was only given by the permanent secretary. That was the rule. It took me some time to work that out when I had these meetings and these largely silent men were sitting around, whilst the permanent secretary was giving me his advice. Then I discovered from my very good private secretary that the permanent secretary was the only official present who had that opinion and that several of the silent ones actually agreed with my opinion. But the tradition there was not to join in. Now, I won't go through the lot but some were much better than others.

PR: How were Health and Education? You spent a reasonable time at both of those.

KC: The quality was much more variable, there were some outstandingly good people [but] the average level was not as high as in the two major departments I have talked about. And you know, it is a bit unfair to make too sweeping a generalisation because they were enormous. But the health department was quite resistant to change. Health is a political graveyard in every Western democracy. Every Western democracy thinks its health service is on the point of collapse. Political excitement and drama runs higher on the subject of health, than any other subject. You can declare war more peacefully than you can reform a healthcare system. And the health department was very geared to minimising the row with its various clientele and lobbyists and interest groups. It is such a giant organisation, the National Health Service, which they were trying, when I first got there, to run centrally and bureaucratically, with a bureaucracy that wasn't up to it. Six thousand officials, God knows what they all did, trying to run it centrally. The secretary of state was personally responsible for anything that went wrong anywhere and the underlying feeling was a kind of beleaguered, let's minimise the fuss feeling.

Hence my favourite, perfectly truthful, anecdote about the health service is when I finally got Margaret [Thatcher] to agree to all the health reforms I wanted to bring in and to get some semblance of management into it and all the rest of it and get some more patient-led, outcome-led decisions taken more locally and less centrally. When I finally came back, in triumph, I then met the permanent secretary. He explained that unfortunately he understood, with enthusiasm, the importance of all this but he had no officials at all who could work on this. And they were all far too busily engaged in what they were doing. So no doubt, in due course, we could start looking at this and get on with it.

But he really didn't want to do it and I had to assemble, with the help of my private office, a group of younger, keener people and getting some people from outside. And then the department responded with some people being very keen. Once they realised it was actually going to happen, it was all hell let loose. It was no good thinking we could keep the BMA [British Medical Association] quiet. Some joined in with great enthusiasm – others detached themselves and just took the view that so long as we had this madman here, this was going to go on and no doubt, when I had moved on, we could get back to a slightly more orderly approach to things. And so it was a giant, self-perpetuating, peace-loving organisation.

The Department of Education again, had this rather giant, self-perpetuating bureaucracy feel about it. It was the only one which had its own political culture. What, as a Conservative, I regard as the fashionable left-wing culture of the '60s. Broadly, they were totally resistant to the Ken Baker reforms which I was putting in place. And they did regard what we were doing as the forces of Victorian reaction. We were going back to a more academic tradition, and in their opinion, didn't understand where education was now going and what it was for. There I ran it like a debating society again but had ferocious arguments

with one or two very bright senior officials who flatly disagreed with everything I was doing. And so you could take decisions but you had to insist on decisions.

You then had to find out within a month whether anybody had done anything whatsoever to implement that decision. And I had to alter some of the structure. I got rid of the old inspectorate and introduced OFSTED because the old inspectorate, its business was not inspecting schools. It did a little bit of that, but not very much. It was just telling me what expert opinion was on policy, which was quite contrary to my own opinions.

PR: But given the limits on time any secretary of state has, how could you ensure that what you decided was actually being done? Just you, at the head of a department, when the culture in the Home Office or education was resistant to change.

KC: I did discover that was a very good question! And the spirit of Sir Humphrey was not dead in those days and it was a good idea to check that it was actually being done. The two I enjoyed most were Health and the Treasury because I did them for the longest. Health in two stints, but when I was made Secretary of State for Health, I had already been Minister of State, about two or three years before. There, I had formed very strong views on what was wrong with this ramshackle, post-war bureaucracy. Therefore, I arrived with a clearly formed agenda and spent my time actually insisting on delivering an agenda of my own.

Similarly the Treasury, I had four years. And so by the end, I was delivering my own agenda. I had arrived at the Treasury, been involved in was one or another on the fringes of economic policy for years. I was a Geoffrey Howe acolyte, I had been on the Economic Affairs Committee in the Cabinet for God knows how long. I did know what I wanted to do.

Some of the others, I rapidly formed clear views about what I wanted to do, because I do tend to rather over rapidly form views when I study things. My regret is I didn't have long enough at them really to deliver my agenda. I was able to do quite a lot at Education.

The Home Office was one of my shortest. I had just about sorted in my own mind what I really wanted to concentrate on, which was mainly police and prison reform and I got reshuffled again because Norman Lamont went under a political bus. So instead of having the whole parliament, which I anticipated, for what would have been some glorious battles with the Police Federation and the Prison Officers Association, I then suddenly found I was zipped over to the Treasury. But I had a good long stint at the Treasury.

What the departments also found, in those days, when Cabinet ministers were, I think, more substantial figures in their own right and more powerful, Number 10 did not expect to run everything in those places. There was no Number 10 department as there is now. There wasn't the control freakery there is now [or] the constant campaigning there is now.

I think one of the things that the best civil servants used to say they found quite remarkable was the quite considerable contrast they would encounter when there was a reshuffle and they got a new secretary of state. And it may be that the same party was providing the government, but you could have an astonishing change of policy when the new minister turned up, let alone style.

Nicola Hughes (NH): On the Treasury, it strikes me that being Chancellor is very different from other ministerial roles. Did you find that? Also what do you think makes a really effective Chancellor?

KC: The Chancellor is different to the others because you get intimately involved with every aspect of government. You know, you do have a kind of across the board role, particularly if you are concerned with any sophisticated fiscal problems if you have got a fiscal crisis. So public spending is determining everything and I spent my entire time trying to get some fiscal discipline back and using monetary policy, not fiscal policy, to control growth.

You are at the heart of things and you can therefore have a bearing. But as I have said, I never imagined that, in the end, my people were going to second guess all the policy and delivery of policy in individual departments. I was a complete contrast in every way with Gordon Brown who followed me. Firstly, I knew all the officials. I had had this rather impulsive making my mind up, followed by this great debating society and this lively, entertaining thing and all arguing the toss and then getting on with it. Terry Burns used to say that he used to come running round the corridor when we had a crisis, so that he got to my room before I had started to decide what we were going to do, so he could talk to me about it.

Gordon Brown, of course, took ages to take a decision. He would find it very, very difficult to take decisions which used to drive the officials completely up the wall. He would just ask for more and more papers before he came to a decision. If anyone challenged his decision at a meeting, that official was never invited to the meeting again. He had no time for this widespread discussion.

But within our government, education, for example, Ken Baker had been an extremely radical reforming minister. Our education reforms in the Thatcher government were Ken Baker's. John MacGregor completely quietened it all down. When I arrived, I found the officials had persuaded him that Ken Baker's experiments had been an interesting trial, but now [it was best to] wait a few years to evaluate the early beginnings of this, to see whether it had any worthwhile effect, before deciding whether to resume it again. And so you had Ken Baker putting in place very radical reforms, John MacGregor putting the whole department back to calm – generally running it as they liked – and then me coming in and all hell let loose again.

When I became Minister of State for Health, my approach to the Health Service, even in my first stint, was totally different to that of Gerry Vaughan who I had taken over from. Gerry had gone for a quiet life and had made a determination that he was never going to close a hospital, which crippled the service with ancient workhouses that we now call geriatric hospitals, being the obvious examples of ones we needed to get rid of quick. I closed more hospitals than most people had hot dinners, and that was only a superficial part of [the] policy. I also tried... I was much more activist than he was, but I think the policies were different.

Then all the officials have to adapt to these changes, some people say changes of emphasis, but really changes of policy sometimes. And also the rather startlingly different working style that some ministers represented when they came in.

The most recent example is when I was of course Justice Minister under David Cameron. The Cameron present system, 21st Century system, is quite different. I had a reforming policy when I was Justice Secretary, Chris Grayling reversed it all, and Michael Gove is busily reversing what Chris did. Having got rid of some of Chris's decisions, [Gove] is now moving back on to my agenda. He seems to have more of a following wind and I hope he is going to have considerable success at being able to implement more of it than I did, because he appears to be having less difficulty with his colleagues than I had. David Cameron never made a speech on justice when I was there. When I was there David Cameron would not have made today's speech [on prison reform], which I find a welcome change.

PR: Going to that point of change. You know, there is a gap of 13 years, you were Chancellor in '97, you go back in 2010 as Justice Secretary, how different was it being a minister?

KC: Well, it had all changed. I think Blair was the one who had completely changed the way the government was run. Number 10 is now a giant department in its own right. And the prime minister has a very large staff of his own – some political appointees, civil servants, a kind of army of people from think-tanks and quite a lot of people from the public relations industry or journalism. And they regard themselves as the setters of policy in a lot of subjects, in considerable detail.

The Cabinet doesn't meet much. It only had one meeting a week, for an hour and a half and some non-Cabinet ministers turn up, although they are not expected to say anything. And the walls are lined with press officers and apparatchiks and other people. The room is positively crowded. The discussion on

individual subjects is quite cursory. And sometimes it does seem, which my friends in Whitehall used to tell me was the case with Tony [Blair] sometimes, that it is merely held so that the Cabinet can be told what is going on and what they might do. There was an expectation, there is all this grid stuff, that as a Cabinet minister you won't say anything unless you ask Number 10's permission, you are clear what you are going to say, and you are given a day upon which you are going to say it.

I won't go on, but you are asking the wrong minister, in a way, because I was in rather an odd position, having been a minister before. And my relationship with David [Cameron] was slightly different. I mean, he was the Prime Minister and certainly the boss and all that. Although I used to joke that I was in the mid-term of my career, I was rather surprised to find I was a Cabinet minister again. He and I had agreed I would do a couple of years and I thought that would be it, at my age. I think my relationship with all this set-up was different from the other, newer ministers. So at first I found all kinds of Number 10 apparatchiks were turning up in the department, having meetings with my officials and discussing policy. So I got them all thrown out and said if anybody wants to come over from Number 10, to have a meeting with my officials, I shall happily chair a meeting and I can put it together and we can all discuss it and see whether we are having any policy ideas we should be exploring. They told me they were preparing a speech for the Prime Minister, that is why they had to do it. That was the only explanation I got. But they never came again, I don't think, unless they were smuggled in without anybody telling me! But the Prime Minister never made a speech on justice my entire time I was there.

I didn't bother with the grid and asking permission and all this rubbish. And at Cabinet I used to raise things which were in the morning's newspaper as opposed to what we were meant to be discussing on the agenda. I persuaded him to have political cabinets once a week, but they soon turned into Lynton Crosby giving us the line to take and explaining what the polls were saying. But occasionally we had proper discussions.

I won't go on, but it is all together a more centralised, organised, presidential, primarily campaigning set up the government now has and I think if you are a young minister or a rising minister, getting your first job in the Cabinet, the role is much more limited unless you are allowed to get on with it, than the one that I was used to. I mean junior ministers probably have more opportunities because always when you are a junior minister, there are things that you are asked to deal with that nobody has time for above you and nobody has ever heard of and you can get on and do your own thing. And the strongest Cabinet ministers I am sure do get on.

But I found that on the whole, I was just being left to get on with it, in my Justice Department, although my more ambitious reforms, which I would have liked to have carried out, were blocked by Number 10 because of course I did have to get parliamentary time for legislation and so on. And I did have to do a bit of negotiating with the Prime Minister about what we were going to do and what we weren't going to do.

PR: One thing you mentioned at the beginning was about teams. That you were a double act with Norman [Fowler], when you started off in '79. When you became Secretary of State, how did you try and run your ministerial teams? You had some quite big ones in various departments?

KC: Yes. The prime minister has always chosen the whole team, but all the prime ministers that I worked for, including Margaret, would let me blackball one that I thought was totally unsuitable or personally couldn't stand or whatever it was. But that was always resolved. But usually I got a reasonably congenial team of people together.

From when I was first Secretary of State, it didn't take me too long – two or three years – to really get better at delegating. First, I used to want to do everything myself and then get them to deliver it, as it were. That doesn't work at a giant department, certainly like Health. So I involved the ministers as much as possible in policy making, particularly I did have some that were just trusted, they were on my wavelength. I'd try out ideas on them and then they would help me deliver and help me do a lot of the public argument, because I was usually in the middle of controversial rows or strikes or whatever it happened to be [in] most of my departments, which was typical of the '80s and true of the '90s a bit.

And then particular bits of the department, if I hadn't got time for it, I would delegate entirely. The most classic one was Virginia Bottomley [who] was my Minister of State when I was doing the Health Reforms in the late 1980s, which I talked about. She had been a social worker, I think, when she was very young. The responsibility for social services, local government, the relationship and all that was a big part of our responsibilities. She did that. I mean, I just told her that was her job. David Mellor's job was to work with me on the reforms and to help me sell it and join [me] in combat, firstly inside the department and then outside the department in getting it done and all the rest of it.

When I was at the Home Office, Peter Lloyd, the running of prisons, complete daily nightmare in those days. What I used to say to Peter, was, 'get on with it. It is all yours. I have got a lot of other things on, major changes I am making, X, Y and Z. So that's yours, go away'. And I said, 'If you make a pig's ear and we are about to have a monumental row, if it happens, tell me the night before. I don't want to wake up and be taken by surprise. So tell me the night before. We will sit down and work out how the hell we get out of it, what we say, and what we do and all the rest of it. Just get me involved in getting out of it'. And people like [David] Trippier and David Mellor and Virginia Bottomley, I don't recall them actually plunging me into many rows. And when Edwina [Currie] had them, they were only her own, they weren't sort of policy things particularly.

But as I said, I devised this all by myself. Apart from my early years with Norman, I sat around a Cabinet table with other secretaries of state without the faintest idea how any of them set policy or ran things, did things. Occasionally you would hear rumours, you would be told that somebody never did his paperwork and also, you knew one or two colleagues who were plainly completely and utterly out of their depth and in a permanent state of panic.

And others were sort of sailing along sublimely and calmly and seemed to be totally in control. People like Douglas Hurd, you know – totally, calmly unruffled. Something must have been going on under the surface, but I could never work out what it was. I liked Douglas, but how he was running it, how he did it, no idea – magisterially and diplomatically I suspect, in the Foreign Office. I was never in the Foreign Office. Nowadays, I don't know whether people ever get any induction or whether there is any standard way.

PR: Well, we have done a bit.

NH: How did you deal with big crises when they hit? Have you got any examples of something suddenly hitting the department and how, as the Secretary of State, you would go about getting through it?

KC: Firstly, I was very upfront, quite combative, that is my personality and my main instinct was to get out there, argue, explain why I was doing things, make my case. So again, in the '80s, we had strikes in different departments. But I would be up front, quite public. I had quite a high public profile in the House of Commons, but in the broadcasting and media, the thing to do is get out there and explain what you thought the dispute was about and why there was this dispute and how you thought it should be resolved and to keep answering the flood of attacks which have come in if you had a crisis. And there are different types of crisis. But I was lucky at the Home Office, I never did have one of these overnight things, which came out of the blue – I never had a prison riot, which is the worst thing that could happen if you are in the Home Office. In Health, I never had an individual patient case which got out of hand.

But otherwise, I would get engaged. Obviously you would assemble the officials in the department whose bailiwick it was, all of them, not just the very senior one and just get down to the bottom of what they thought was happening and how we would get out of it and what we were going to resolve. But I just took it as part of a feature of life.

On the one hand, I am very laid back. On the other hand, I quite enjoy crises and rows and so on, that is what it is for – gets the adrenaline going. So I would be quite an eager beaver, getting the officials together, getting the press officer in, going out and doing interviews and generally trying to work out in my own mind how to get not just the public presentation going the right way, because I think public

presentation is of limited value in itself. Key thing is to work with the officials to get the reality going the right way. Firstly, make sure that on the whole, you are on reasonably sound ground and also to feel confident that what you are doing about it is actually going to work. That is how you get out of crises.

PR: How do you balance departments, the House and the constituency?

KC: Well, the hours are colossal. I couldn't do it now. Education, particularly Health, and particularly the Treasury. I mean, you just have to get by with not much sleep and your family and everything do get squeezed out a bit. I have the usual basic parliamentary timetable for my timetable of the weekdays in London, weekends in the constituency and I used to drive the Treasury people up the wall, in one or two of my departments, once or twice a week I would meet the shorthand secretaries I had and I would dictate all my constituency mail in two great long batches and then sign as they sent them in. I insisted that the officials would put constituency signing stuff in the box and that is how I would do the constituency work.

House of Commons, well, I liked hanging around the House of Commons when I could, but you see less of it when you are a minister. And otherwise just sort of get down to it. Red boxes I always did in the middle of the night with a large cigar and a brandy and during the day, meetings.

The departments always wanted me to go off and do more visits. Particularly when you were doing things they didn't like, they would try to get you to visit hospitals and prisons and schools, which of course you must visit every now and again. Or if you are in the Treasury, you know, go and put a hard hat on and visit a factory. It is a way of stopping you doing things and getting you out of the way, I used to think. At Education they used to tell me, 'Mr Short used to do nine schools in a day'. And I remember answering at one point, 'Well what the hell is the point of that? What good was that actually doing?' I don't actually remember Ted Short doing anything when he was Education Minister, which presumably was the point, as far as they were concerned.

And there is a limit to how far you can visit hospitals or universities because you always had a demo or a riot anyway. So there seemed to me to be a limited point. I didn't go to trade union conferences, because all you did was publicise the trade union conference and they would lay on some sort of demo and the conference would be a non-event so long as a secretary of state didn't turn up, [it] seemed to me. Did the RCN occasionally, but only after a long, hard discussion with them and they were quite reasonable, the Royal College of Nursing, that there were to be no demos and that there was no stunts and I would never come again if they did that. But on the whole, I couldn't see the point in doing any of that. So a great deal of my time was in the office, with the constant meetings and then I would spend the evenings in the House of Commons, in the old timetabled days, there were a lot of parliamentary debate questions and so on.

And then the media, I was very high profile in the media. I mean now it is quite out of fashion. I won't name current individuals, [but] they are all advised now to vanish, as soon as there is any row, and put some obscure junior minister in, which I think was, like many of today's fashionable public relations techniques, a complete failure.

PR: Well, you always were in favour of going out and...

KC: Yes. If someone says anything outrageous on the lunchtime radio, I wish to be on the PM programme replying to it, yes.

PR: How important were the permanent secretaries to you, as opposed to other officials.

KC: They were really quite important. The atmosphere in the department rather depended on who you got as permanent secretary. Some were very – I won't mention any names – some were helpful, dominant, all the rest of it. Others were useless. Others, if they could see you were going to do a lot of things anyway, just got out of the way and very efficiently looked after the pay and rations and that sort of thing. Some permanent secretaries I worked with much more closely than others and I had to have a

reasonable relationship with the permanent secretary, because that very much affected your relationship with the whole department.

I never insisted on getting rid of a permanent secretary and I did have some good ones. I suppose maybe because they are the most recent, I remember them most clearly. I had an extremely good relationship with Terry Burns, at the Treasury. And at Justice, Suma Chakrabarti, was quite outstanding, he and I were a good team together. But I suspect I am being unfair to some of the others, although really some didn't make any difference at all. There was a very good Defence man we had at Employment, but he had only been parked at Employment because the Defence [post] wasn't free yet.

PR: Was that Clive Whitmore?

KC: No. I don't think it was. The man who wrote the great thing about the bomb, wrote the book about the deterrent.

PR: Oh. Michael Quinlan.

KC: Yes. I got on very well with him, because he was a brilliant man, he was one of the most outstanding men I had ever met. But he left David Young and me to run the department. He knew bugger all about it. We had much stronger views than he had. We had no trouble at all, he could manage a department like Employment, it was a very good department, but he could manage it with no problem. And we all knew he was waiting to become permanent secretary for Defence, which was the job he was born to do, he was just cut out for. And off he went to do that in due course.

PR: Therefore was the most important thing really having a good private office?

KC: Yes. The private office is key.

PR: And did you have a say in the appointment of private secretaries, to make sure that they would be your key link?

KC: Yes. I am very bad at choosing people in interviews and all that kind of thing. I always used to insist on a choice, otherwise the permanent secretary will always try to give you a rising star who the permanent secretary had thought would benefit from this experience. Only once was I offered the permanent secretary's mistress, but fortunately I was tipped off about that and got somebody else. [laughter]

I relied on a very close relationship – the private office had to be double agents. They are your eyes and ears, as well as delivering for you and they manage your day, they manage your work, they book the meetings, they fill the box and all the rest of it. And then their other jobs, if you have got a really good private secretary, and I had some really good private secretaries, is they tell you what the department is really up to. That is how you discover what is happening and what is not happening.

And of course, at the same time, I have not the slightest doubt, they tell the department what the secretary of state is really up to. And if you have got a strong permanent secretary, that gives them a very key relationship. So although I didn't work with him for very long, I mean somebody like Jeremy Heywood, at the Treasury, was absolutely pivotal, because I got this really high-powered, very young and gauche in those days, private secretary and his relationships in most directions were excellent. And Nick Macpherson who followed him, in a much more staid way, but he was equally effective.

I probably can remember their names if I scratch my head. I had some very good other ones. There was a very good one who didn't stay in the Civil Service. Most of them wind up as permanent secretaries and things eventually, the ones who were any good. But Andy McKean was quite key to me at the Health Department. I don't know what he did wrong – he never quite rose to the top, probably because he had been my key right-hand man in the health reforms. He wasn't personally the strongest member of the team, but he was the person who arranged it and organised it and so on. And again, they all varied and I used to try and knit them together. Special advisers, when I started having them...

PR: Well, I was going to ask about that.

KC: Well, they have got to be policy people. They worked closely with my private office. They are not a separate lot and I don't want all this briefing the press and liaising with Number 10 and all this rubbish. I want a serious input into doing the job. And several of the departments I was in, quite excellent spads I had sometimes, were just a bit like me, politicised, but worked alongside my private office and my private secretary and worked with them. And of course, they could do things which were party political, which the officials were strictly forbidden from doing, quite rightly. But the whole thing had to be one team, not two separate blocks of people.

NH: Did you observe big changes in the Civil Service and in departments between the '80s and coming back in 2010?

KC: Yes. It has got much less traditional. I mean, it has got better. I think the intellectual calibre has remained the same. It gets more difficult in some departments. The turnover in the Treasury is far too high, because pay restraint is beginning to be a problem with high fliers. But I am a great believer in the non-political Civil Service. I deeply object to the growth in the number of political people. I do think we have too many spads, and the spads are appointed for the wrong reasons, quite often. And I think that the British tradition of the non-political Civil Service is fine, so long as the Civil Service do accept what is supposed to be. It is the government that makes the policy and they are there to advise and to warn, but also to deliver and that we are going to do things and it is going to be active. And the best officials respond very well to that. And I think it still works well.

I used to deeply object to these proposals [that] you should increasingly politicise the top ranges of the Civil Service and so on. All the faults that all ministers have of being largely political get magnified by surrounding them with people who are of the same political bent. Perhaps not quite so expert as they are believed to be when you appoint them. And some of the young political advisers are just as bad as I was when I was young. They think they can rule the world, but actually you get policy advice which is barking mad. And then they tell you the prime minister agrees with it and if you are not careful, it all starts happening and you have got to stop it.

They started in John Major's day and I had people ringing me up and then officials coming in and saying 'Number 10 say we have got to do X' and I would say 'who in Number 10?' And they would say who it was and I would say 'well, if the prime minister wishes to take their view, get a meeting in the diary, the Treasury has to see the prime minister regularly, and I will meet the prime minister and he can explain to me what he wants to do and we will discuss it'. Often you would never hear anything more about it, because the prime minister hadn't a bloody clue, that some irk was invoking his authority, trying to herd some mad course of activity on the strength of something he had read the day before. And that danger is spreading.

PR: You mentioned your reluctance to go on visits for the sake of it, the filling up of your diary...

KC: I wasn't reluctant, but I hadn't got time.

PR: Did that also apply to meetings with outside groups? You know, what was your attitude to that? Because one of the classic complaints...

KC: To ration them.

PR: ...is that private offices like to fill you up with widget manufacturers...

KC: Oh they do like meetings to keep the minister busy. I don't know if it still goes on, I haven't been aware of it for my later years. In the old days, you would get more and more paperwork. When the Thatcher government came in, they weren't used to government having policy in a lot of departments. This attitude which I have described in one or two departments: 'you don't want things to change too

much minister', was quite widespread, because they were used to a series of governments which hadn't changed very much.

The great thing about the Thatcher government was she had a policy on every damn thing and even where it hadn't got a policy, like Transport, Norman and I invented them and started privatising things. And if the parliamentary secretary was getting too excited about all this, which I think they thought I was, suddenly the amounts of paperwork, some of which was inconsequential, would pile up.

I used to get round that with my private office. There was a submission on a European bus stop. Some minister had gone to a conference in the fairly recent past and they had signed up to – it wasn't an EU thing, it was a cross-Europe transport ministers gathering – a standard bus stop in every country, so you would know what a bus stop was, whatever European country you were in. And this was a question of could we implement and what it would cost this European bus stop. And I would go through my red box, then suddenly I would reach a submission on the European bus stop. And that was an agreed signal from my office. Above this, you must do this tonight. Below this, if you have got time. [laughter]. I was taken out for lunch once by an official who said I was getting behind in signing my ministerial correspondence and they obviously were trying to slow me down. And I came across similar things like that afterwards.

PR: Just finally, what would your advice be to someone who is becoming a minister on how to be effective?

KC: Unless you arrive with clear views on the subject, don't do too much for however long it takes you, for a month or two. Again, I am singing Gove's praises, I shall probably be fighting him in this [European] referendum before long, because I don't agree with Michael on everything. But his approach to Justice – because I have had meetings with him – absolutely ideal. He realised when he was Justice Secretary he knew nothing about it, he never expected in his life he would be Lord Chancellor. And he really spent two months doing a vast amount of work, meeting a lot of people, getting a feel for it and deciding what his views were. And he has now started getting quite active, but he has been there for, well, eight months, so it is about time he started getting active. So don't take instant decisions.

Try to ignore the advice of colleagues, including the prime minister, about something you must do straight away, until you have had a meeting or two about it and decided you have really got your head around and you want to do it. Don't sign the documents the permanent secretary will bring to you in the first week, saying 'Secretary of State your predecessor was just about to clear this before you arrived, we needn't bother about it too much, it is perfectly straightforward, just if you would authorise it'. They have been trying to sell that to every secretary of state they have had walk through the door for some time and it is probably dangerous. Find out what it is about.

And map out an agenda. You need, somehow, not to take too many decisions at first. Deal with what is absolutely essential, but you have got to move on from just reacting nervously, event by event, document by document, dossier by dossier, submission by submission. After six months, you need to have some idea of what it is you want to do whilst you are in this portfolio. Is there anything that needs to be done? If there is, in your opinion, how do you make that your agenda? How are you going to produce a bit of change, a bit of movement and so on? Because you have got to move on from being slightly shocked and overwhelmed by events to actually being in charge and having some idea of where, at least, you are trying to go and what you are trying to do.

That is quite difficult and I have seen people appointed to jobs where they really never got out of the rabbit in the headlights stage from the moment they arrived. They just submit to sitting at the desk, waiting for officials telling them what to do and just signing things put in front of them or agreeing to Roger Moore reading out the speeches that have been drafted for them, explaining what they are doing. Both of those are slight exaggerations, I have simplified it. But take your time, don't do anything too quickly, [but] don't wait too long.

Once you get over the initial shock, try and get your head around – once you have taken a bit of time reading into it, getting into it, meeting a few people who are interesting – how you are going to pursue it? What is your agenda and how are you going to pursue it?

I also say that the standard thing for a minister – my joke account of it always is when you first arrive, you are overwhelmed. All this stuff, people talk to you about all kinds of things, there are things you have never worked at before. And if you are not careful, you will get a moment of panic. You have finally gone up the slippery pole, you have gone a bit too high now and this is all too much and you are overwhelmed by it. The next stage, after six months is you have got an agenda. You know exactly what you are going to do. We are going to look at X, Y, Z, that is what you are going to do, if you possibly can. The next stage, after two years, you are really on top of it. I mean, you really are comfortable, you are doing things. But you realise that the decisions you took after six months were wrong and you have changed your mind. After two years, you are sitting in control now, behind your desk, where you are really going to do this, this, and this. And then the phone rings and the prime minister is having a reshuffle and you move on to the next department and you are back at the beginning, there you are, panicking again.

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