

# Ministers reflect

Michael Moore

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## Biographical details

### Electoral history

2005-2015: Member of Parliament for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk

1997-2005: Member of Parliament for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale

### Parliamentary career

2010-2013: Secretary of State for Scotland

2008 (Mar)-2008 (Oct): Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

2008 (Mar)-2008 (Oct): Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland

2007-2010: Shadow Secretary of State for International Development

2006-2007: Shadow Secretary of State (Foreign Affairs)

2005-2006: Shadow Secretary of State for Defence

2001-2005: Shadow Minister (Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs)

*Michael Moore (MM) was interviewed by Jen Gold (JG) and Peter Riddell (PR) on 27th January 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project*

**Peter Riddell (PR):** Going back to the Opposition years, was there any sense of preparation pre-2010? I mean, the party did a lot of planning about coalition scenarios – Chris Huhne did lots of stuff and Danny [Alexander] did, and so on. Was there much thinking about how you would operate as ministers?

**Michael Moore (MM):** None whatsoever to my memory. Others may remember it differently. You are right though, there was preparation for possible coalitions and there was the regular going through the motions where the Civil Service invited certain spokespeople in to talk about their agendas, what they might do if in government. I think it is true to say that in 2010, in advance of the election, that was a much more comprehensive exercise by Whitehall than had ever been the case before. They had tended previously, I think, to pick one or two people that they would talk to and that was deemed to be as much as they needed to do. But there was no preparation for what it would be like to become a minister and there was no support once you became one.

**PR:** You came in three and a half weeks after the election, in the reshuffle. When you arrived at the Scotland Office, was there any kind of induction for you? I mean, you came in on a weekend, three weeks after everyone else, for all the reasons we know. What kind of support was there for you as a new secretary of state?

**MM:** It would be perhaps harsh to say there was none, but there was certainly not a formal programme. There were all sorts of people who knew it was their job to put themselves at my disposal. So I had a phone call from the then Director, the evening that I had been appointed, which would have been a Saturday night. I then had a phone call from my Principal Private Secretary, explaining the logistics of cars coming to pick me up and all this kind of stuff. I'd had a short phone call with the Prime Minister after Nick [Clegg] had offered me the position informally. And that was then pretty well it.

The Monday was a bank holiday and I basically came down to London with a view to being in place for the start of everything. But after that, no, it was just walk in and of course people were very helpful, but there was no manual. To be honest, would I have read one? What could it have said that would have been useful to me? Politics is a very individual sport ultimately, and sometimes I think it is a bit of a franchise system. You know, you take the franchise of your party, but what you make of it is very much up to yourself. And I think that slightly continues through into government.

**PR:** But it was an unusual department anyway, because of the nature of devolution. So how did the department explain how it worked?

**MM:** I had been briefed over the phone, on the Saturday or Sunday – I am trying to remember, it was my daughter's first birthday party when I got the phone call from Nick. So it was all a bit chaotic. But within an hour or so of that, I had had phone calls with the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and then with Alex Salmond the following night. So the machinery kind of moved in around me very quickly and, before I had even set foot in the Scotland Office, I had talked to all these very senior people and then been left to it.

The thing with the Scotland Office at the time, however, was we had a big bill in prospect. And that had suddenly made Scotland a much bigger deal. Danny [Alexander] had put that in motion in his two and a half weeks there and so I walked in with a sense that the department was gearing up after a few years of running down. We had suffered from the fact that it had been a shared secretary of stateship, under a

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number of different people until Jim Murphy was given it as an electioneering platform, which he very skilfully did in the build up to 2010. But as I discussed with him subsequently, what was going on in his private office, what was going on in policy – all that was an utter irrelevance to him. Tom Greatrex was one of his special advisers and people like him were the people that mattered to him.

So I inherited a department that had been ignored by Whitehall and ignored by the Secretary of State. It needed to get right back up the gears again to own the process because almost immediately the Cabinet Office wanted to come in and take over the bill [the Scotland Bill] and the Treasury was certainly saying ‘we will have the bill’. Danny [Alexander] wasn’t giving up on what was going to happen with the financing aspects of it – and thank goodness, because he was absolutely critical to delivering the bill as we needed it.

**PR: If we can just jump back a bit, when you said if there had been a manual, you wouldn’t have time to read it, is there anything subsequently which you wish you had known or at least someone had told you about? About being a minister, that is.**

**MM:** Yes. I think there are three critical bits to the operation in a department as small as that. One is your principal private secretary, one is your special adviser, and the other is the kind of head of department, in my case, obviously he was director level and not any higher. I formed that informally into what we called ‘the quartet’ and they were the people I expected to sort things out for me. With the benefit of hindsight, I would have got them together as a team much sooner and I would have had more confidence to deal with the weak links in that chain. I really hadn’t got it sorted until Euan Roddin [then a special adviser] had come in – a first class guy. Euan was a brilliant operator and went out there and stitched together the political network for me in Whitehall. And Colin Faulkner, who has now left the Civil Service and gone off to the Green Investment Bank, was critical in time. Colin had been in the Cabinet Office, and when he came in, [along with] Alisdair [McIntosh] – the three of them and me – that was the point, in about 2012, early 2013, where I was happiest in the department.

**PR: Well, you mentioned something very interesting there, which is working as a team. Had you been used to team working? Because politicians are in a sense kind of small family businesses, in your constituency work, you have three or four people working with you, especially having a [Scottish] Borders seat, you have your base in the constituency and a few people in London. Were you used to working in a team in the way you described it, with the quartet, like that?**

**MM:** Yes. I was, because my background as a chartered accountant prepared me for that and I had treated my constituency operation in that kind of way. We had weekly team phone calls, hour-long things, so I was clear that you needed a plan, a set of tasks, [and] a set of responsibilities. My background in a big professional services firm definitely helped: I worked with small teams and huge teams and I had learned flexibility. And actually, one of the things that away from the politics I believe I was able to do in the Scotland Office, was help to professionalise the way it operated. At times it had seemed there was no sense of urgency or pride about such basic things as correspondence. And I knew that politically, I needed to keep the MPs in Scotland as happy as I could, in the circumstances. Because on the one hand, Labour loathed us because we were doing a deal with the Tories and doing all this austerity and welfare reform. On the other hand, they were our best friends because we were keeping the [Scottish] nationalists at bay.

And my time in the Scotland Office had a mid-point where the Scottish National Party won the majority. And whereas that could have been the end of me, actually that created a platform and totally changed the office dynamic: we were no longer a back-marker department and had moved to the front line.

**PR: When you took over, you say you inherited the bill from Danny, was that the main objective you had? When you had all those phone calls on [that] Saturday night, was ‘sort out the bill’, take it through’ [your main instruction]?**

**MM:** Yes. That was the major task, although it was seen to be in relatively benign circumstances. You know, this was regarded as being relatively straightforward. The bit nobody ever really twigged, and this was typical later of both Cameron and Clegg, I mean, I don’t actually want to make this a partisan point, was they didn’t really get what was going on in Scotland and that we couldn’t just do the bill. And when Salmond won his majority, that became much more obvious.

**PR: Did you have any kind of role model? Someone you thought you would like to be like as a minister?**

**MM:** I regard myself as having an above average sense of self-awareness, so I never thought I could flatter myself and compare myself to some of the great politicians of the past. I thought I have just got to do this on my own terms. I wasn’t part of Nick Clegg’s inner circle at any stage, which is why I was dispensable when it came to 2013. So I had to make my own way in Whitehall and fight my way. And actually the experience of government has taught me street-fighting skills that I had never had previously, which will be useful for the rest of my days. So no, there was no role model as such. But there was a big challenge, not least in the Scotland Bill, it was meant to be Danny’s baby. He then goes off to a huge job where his time to concentrate on Scotland becomes more limited and I find that, beyond the Calman Report, there wasn’t a draft bill or anything approaching that. I sat in the hideous video conference suite in the basement of Dover House, in the week after I was appointed, with Jim Gallagher [then a senior civil servant] sitting on one side of me, all the other senior civil servants sitting around me, folk in Edinburgh: all of them waiting for my wisdom and insight. So Jim Gallagher, in his very smart way, says, ‘So, Minister, do you want this in the bill or not? And if you want that in the bill, what version of that do you want?’ And I kind of recognised that I could bluff my way through one meeting, but I had to get up to speed very, very quickly – even just to create authority for myself. And that was the bit where it might have been useful to have a wise bit of counsel. And none of that was forthcoming. I mean, I was comfortable with it all and worked out how to get it there, but it could have been made more straightforward.

The Scotland Office, because it was so light on people and political clout within Whitehall, set an interesting challenge. It didn’t matter that we had got manifesto commitments. I mean, had Philip Hammond [then Transport Secretary] really understood what was going on with, you know, the proposal to allow speed limits to be devolved to Scotland? Clearly he hadn’t, because the first conversation we had with the Department for Transport was that this was the most preposterous, ridiculous idea that he had ever heard in his life. He was the outlier refusenik, right to the end when we came up with a precedent from Ireland that allowed us to do it. So even though this was, again, that kind of moment when naivety crunches up against political reality; it may be we are all superficially signed up to this, but you are going to have to win every single battle for every bit of the bill all the way along, from a weak position. Because you don’t have the network or the authority within Whitehall until you have created it for yourself and that took a bit of time.

**Jen Gold (JG): Obviously the Scottish Secretary role is quite different to that of many of your counterparts. Could you give us a sense of the day-to-day reality of being the Scottish Secretary? How was most of your time actually spent?**

**MM:** If there was ever such a thing as a typical week, I would be collected from home early on a Monday morning, I would be taken up to Edinburgh, deposit the papers that I had had over the weekend and go into back-to-back meetings until lunchtime. I would be on a lunchtime flight, get down here and go rushing – because it was always tight – down to a Lib Dem Cabinet Minister’s meeting that was held in

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Nick's offices in Parliament. That went into a ministerial meeting of Lib Dems and peers and then I would get to the department again. So I would have done the Edinburgh bit and the London bit and then I was in what I called the 'moth pit', in the upper ministerial corridor, which was handy for the Chamber, but there was very little space; apparently it was an ante room, you could tell it was an ante room, to [John] Prescott's rooms in its day. I was the last one in, so I got the worst office and probably spent the most time there. But that is by the by: it was a trade-off for having perhaps the most magnificent of the departmental offices at Dover House!

So Monday night was when you would be given the Cabinet papers, all that stuff, you needed to be ready for that the next day. I just established a routine that I got into the Scotland Office at seven in the morning, on the days that I was in London and I had this glorious hour and a half with no interruptions. No danger of anybody being in and when I asked for 'the quartet' to meet at half eight on a Tuesday morning, it took a bit of time for them to realise that he is actually serious.

It was full on all weeks. I was allowed flexibilities on Mondays and Thursdays – I was very rarely in London on a Thursday – in return for being a 100% attendee [on] Tuesdays and Wednesdays. And so that was just what we had to accept. Tuesday and Wednesday were the most intense days. Wednesday night, towards the end, I was on a flight back up [to Scotland] because the referendum pace was picking up, but typically it was Thursday morning. And the flight could be to anywhere – it could be Aberdeen, Glasgow, Inverness or Edinburgh – and then I would do a day on the road. I tried to have a mindset that said I have got a responsibility to all parts of Scotland, so I have got to be visible. We were competing against the Scottish Government, which has got a full team of ministers and a presence in every part of the country. I did not want to be vulnerable to people saying, 'We have never seen the Secretary of State for Scotland in the Western Isles, we have never seen him in Dundee', all this kind of stuff. So that meant I was on the road a lot.

I was back home, every Thursday night. Although I might have been late after a dinner or something like that. Fridays were constituency days, with very rare exceptions and I basically got to the point where if it was important enough and it really had to be done, then people came to me. Once or twice in the early days, non-constituents turned up at my constituency surgeries, because they were open. And then *The Telegraph* taped me (Ed Davey, and Vince [Cable] famously): I was one of the ones caught in that broad stinging operation, at which point I closed down my open surgeries and did appointments only. That also dealt with folk coming from other parts of Scotland.

So Fridays were very much in the Borders but I would have a comms call on a Friday afternoon, usually arranged to fit with my travel pattern in the constituency. Material would arrive on a Friday night. Saturday I was being the local MP usually, trying to fit the family in and Sunday was really variable – there were months, in the build up to the bill, where Sundays were just at my desk or even, as we got closer to the St Andrews Day launch, down in London, because you had to really be there on the Monday morning.

**JG: Did you come up with any strategies for coping with those competing demands on your time?**

**MM:** Structure. Imposing a framework on the week and making it clear that only by exception would we vary it, that helped. I also got the department to do something they had never done, which was plan ahead for how we used the parliamentary recesses.

**PR: Yes. Funnily enough, it was exactly the question I was going to ask. You described the Parliament sitting...**

**MM:** In recess, I basically, pretty well gave Monday to Thursday over to the Scotland Office. So long as I could keep the constituency day – because my profile was so high in Scotland, or high enough that my constituents noticed it, that I didn't have to worry about justifying it. You could see I was in Scotland. That was my big fear: would I be seen as being down in London and remote or not? But that wasn't an issue at all. I mean, ultimately things were an issue, because they didn't re-elect me. But I don't judge that it was anything to do with being a minister and being absent.

Stakeholder engagement was a huge part of the job – being the Government's representative in Scotland, without appearing like you were an ambassador or the governor general, as some of my opponents occasionally would call me. And using that time to go on [a] three- or four-day road trip and really get around and about in different communities. I really enjoyed that. Because I had a big constituency and got the idea you had to get out and about, not just sit in one town and wait for folk to come to you, mentally it was quite an easy thing to embrace.

**PR: Did anything suffer from these pulls on your time? For example, did you spend enough time with your House of Commons colleagues?**

**MM:** Yes. I think I would argue I did because by Monday night, I was probably in the tearoom or wherever having dinner. Often you would go from that ministerial catch up into the tearoom and you would be amongst your colleagues there. We had parliamentary party meetings on Tuesday afternoon. In fairness, the Cabinet ministers, Lib Dem Cabinet ministers were the most loyal attenders. I mean, you had to cut slack to Danny and to Nick, but Vince [Cable], myself, Chris [Huhne] and then Ed [Davey], you know, we were all in there pretty well every week. So you were visible and we got, or Nick particularly got, quite a hard time in those meetings. I mean, one hears about what [Jeremy] Corbyn gets at his meetings – Nick can relate to that. You know, it was hard pounding.

And socially, you know, I had a well-established little group of friends. Alistair Carmichael one, Don Foster, John Thurso. And the four of us – and Mark Hunter, I guess, became a fifth part of that – we were pretty tight and that was, just as an individual, really helpful. Some of my colleagues were more loners. I don't know how they found the experience. No, I kept it in balance.

**JG: A slightly different line of questioning, but we are interested in people's style of decision making. I wondered if you could talk us through an occasion where an unexpected event or crisis hit the department and how you went about dealing with it?**

**MM:** Right, unexpected crises, they should all rush into my head. Okay, we got a hospital pass from my dear friend Danny at one point about emergency towing vessels, which are there to protect the shipping up the west coast of Scotland and the Northern Isles. The Department for Transport had said in the Spending Review they weren't funding them anymore. They had been brought in after the Braer [oil tanker] disaster, and they were seen as a massive drain on resources and they decided they weren't paying for them, so they were coming out.

Now Danny, as a Scottish MP, could see, [as could] Alistair Carmichael, as our Chief Whip, that this was politically disastrous. How could that get fixed? So it came to the Scotland Office to do it. I had no leverage with anybody, but it was a kind of sub-theme of the rest of the year, working out how we could make the case to justify one of them being kept in public books and finding an alternative arrangement for the other. I started with officials and the Coastguard and Maritime Agency all sitting down together and then working it out.

In the end, we came up with a plan and got the funding... and this was a personality thing. Philip Hammond had gone, Justine Greening had come in. Justine, from the Treasury, of course, tenacious as hell when it came to it – she wasn't for moving. We worked through our respective issues, however, even

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if it was occasionally fraught, and solved the problems in principle. The challenge meant you had to set up the structure yourself, you had to go and do negotiation personally, one-to-one. On one occasion, I asked for all the officials to leave the room just so that Justine and I could have a frank discussion. Then she moved on and Patrick McLoughlin arrived. And he was a mate of Alistair Carmichael's and had been well tee'd up to this, although he didn't give me an easy time. But suddenly it all kind of fell in place. Separate to that, we had started talking to the industry and eventually got BP to make one of their vessels available [and] do the rescue stuff, should it be required, a magnificent gesture by them.

There were problems like this: the attitude of the rest of Whitehall to Scotland was, 'well, there is the Scotland Office to keep them off our backs'. But we didn't get the information or the intelligence to allow us to do that. So often you would get 24-hours' notice of an MOD [Ministry of Defence] decision or DCMS [Department for Culture, Media & Sport] decision. DCMS thinks all the policy is all devolved, but they have got broadcasting, they have got broadband responsibility, which were two hot topics. And they were also involved in things like the Olympics and supporting the Commonwealth Games. It was a constant battle to get in amongst them. And you really only could prove after mistakes had been made that you had to be listened to. And again, setting up the informal networks that allowed you to get the information in a timely manner and the influence on things was one of the biggest challenges of the department.

**JG: Looking back, what do you feel was your greatest achievement in office, something you are particularly proud of?**

**MM:** The Edinburgh Agreement. Without doubt.

**JG: And what factors would you say were key to that success?**

**MM:** Because I had an almighty battle within the Cabinet and then within the Civil Service to persuade people of the approach that we needed to take. And then, against my usual temperament, I argued for a position different to the prevailing consensus and so took a large personal, political risk about the way we needed to do it. I mean, I got people persuaded of the approach, but there was no question whose ideas people were following and in the summer of 2012, it didn't necessarily look like we were going to get the deal. But we did.

That whole process was another example of how the Scotland Office had to leverage Whitehall to its own effect as carefully as possible. The Chancellor chaired a ministerial committee on Scotland, which set the formal tone of things. I had run-ins with officials because... I learned the hard way that it is the official who writes down the conclusions of the meeting, who has the power and if they take a different view to you as to how the meeting has gone, you are stuffed. And actually, it caused a minor to-do, on one occasion, when I got the conclusions and said that is actually factually inaccurate and got them to change the conclusions, which was, I was told at the time, almost unheard of. So the formalities of Whitehall you needed to play along with and win the battles there, but I also created an informal committee of senior officials, with Phillip Rycroft [a Director General at the Cabinet Office] right at the heart of it, and he was first class in that. We called it the SOCOT meeting – the Scotland Office, Cabinet Office and Treasury – and basically it was our way of pulling together the key people to keep the pace of work on the Edinburgh Agreement and then after that, the analysis papers for the [Scottish independence] referendum, kind of getting the momentum behind that.

**PR: How did you operate across Whitehall? As you said, you are a very small unit. How did you build up networks to get that influence?**

**MM:** A bit of trial and error. And yes, you tended to learn from your mistakes. A lot of it was personal. I used every opportunity at Cabinet to capture a ministerial colleague. I became a real supporter of the

old-fashioned way of voting in the House of Commons, because I spent my years in opposition thinking it was a great way when votes are on to catch a minister that you would never get past the private office to meet. I once helped Des Browne avoid a massive disaster with veteran's medals in Scotland on account of that. But I realised then as a minister, actually it was one of the best ways to catch up with harder to reach colleagues: you were free of absolutely every other barrier like PPSs! [Principal Private Secretaries] In fact, I guess the Chancellor and the Home Secretary and others hated it, because other ministers could nobble them. But that was the way you did it and you built up a personal relationship, you built up trust.

There were double issues for us: we were in a department that was quite small, but also a lot of the other departments I needed to work with were Conservative-run and I didn't have strong, personal relationships with them in advance. But actually, this was a feature of the whole Coalition, the bit I directly was involved in, and the bit I observed, was there was a really business-like attitude to it all. The ministers that I dealt with, whether Oliver Letwin, David Willetts, the Chancellor and others, [were] always accessible, always got the time that you needed. And the Chancellor, actually, on several occasions was extremely helpful to me, because I could find out that things were being said on his behalf that turned out not to be fully accurate and between the two of us, we were able to kind of steer things back.

**PR: Of course you had a Conservative deputy in the now current Secretary of State [David Mundell]. Did that help or make a difference?**

**MM:** David [Mundell] needed to get a voice in the whole process. At one level, his role was basically to do all the pretty difficult SI [statutory instruments] stuff. I was very happy with that traditional split of responsibility; he covered off that and there was a lot of that, surprising amounts of it. He also provided hugely important political intelligence about the Government and our counterparts in Scotland. My job was to be across all the material and in the first few months I literally read everything I could that was in my box – the write rounds, all that kind of stuff. And eventually you realise, I am going to do my head in this way and you learned how to sift and everything else. But that was the way you picked up the potential errors in other departments' plans.

And also, over time, it helped getting a more savvy group of people who are filtering it to me. Because at first, it was that classic muddle where everything appeared, no order, no sense of priority. Over time, better people and a greater sense of what matters prevailed.

**PR: What about the special advisers? You had a change there, as you said. How important were the special advisers to operating? Given it was a Lib Dem special adviser, could they plug into a Tory network or was it very much restricted to the [Lib Dem] network and ensuring they were liaising with Nick's ones and Danny's ones and so on?**

**MM:** I couldn't have done my job without Euan [Roddin]. I mean, we became very good friends. I didn't really know him. He was a recommendation, actually, from Alistair [Carmichael]. Alistair had known him when he had been a speechwriter. He was over in Brussels, he was actually on the verge of taking a job with Chris Huhne as his speech writer and I got wind of this and stepped in, recruiting this guy I didn't know. But we quickly hit it off and he stitched the politics within Whitehall together for me and gave me a 3D vision that I couldn't otherwise have had. There was a lot of that about what was going on within Lib Dem policy areas, but they weren't terribly interested in Scotland. So he spent most of his time working on the Number 10 and the Treasury people to make sure they kind of got it.

And [he] also tried to anticipate some of the big, non-constitutional, political issues for Scotland, like the defence review. We had an almighty battle with the aircraft carriers. I don't know if the contract hadn't been as tight, whether they would have just ignored me and gone on with abandoning them anyway. But

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I put up an almighty fight. In the end, they didn't have much choice it seems to me. So yes, Euan was plugged into that. He knew the journalists, he also developed his links with the Labour Party and over time that reaped its rewards as well.

### **PR: What was the greatest frustration about being a minister?**

**MM:** Being responsible for things that you hadn't known about until about five minutes before. And if you looked at the transcripts of my first year of appearing in front of the Scottish Affairs Committee, with Ian Davidson just having a lot of fun, at my expense. I was accountable for everything. You sat there and he said, 'Well, you are the Government representative for Scotland and you are responsible for it all.' And you were, in effect.

Perhaps my most uncomfortable moments were in early TV interviews. One in particular, I will never forget it, with Newsnight's Scottish version where I was asked some questions about what was going on with the number of people in care in Scotland and how they would be affected by benefit reform and I had no idea. I didn't even understand what the policy was that they were trying to get at. And again, being self-aware, I wasn't always the sharpest media operator. The media side of things, eventually kind of came: it turned around and by the time I left, I was happy with it. Indeed, I had political obituaries asking, 'Why is he going?', which compared rather well to what I was getting in the first six months: that was a massive turnaround.

Again, I think the Government comms machine is totally focused on Number 10, even your own departmental people. They dread the phone call from the Number 10 Press Office saying this needs to be done now. There is not a lot of support for new ministers or to help people who are not naturals at performing in the media. Most of my press guys, whom I liked and were great fun, had been there, seen it, done it, for 10, 15 years and I was just the latest in a long line of people that they would deal with.

### **PR: And how would you make government more effective?**

**MM:** You can't escape the fact that there needs to be more accountability for ministers to their peers. I didn't know I was going to be sacked until the phone call came, where Nick [Clegg] said, 'Sorry, Mike, but I judge that we need this set of skills for the next period. I also have an issue that I need to reward Alistair for his loyal service to me as the Chief Whip.' Now, politicians need to have a sixth sense about it, you have watched this more often than I have, most of them don't see their sackings coming.

### **PR: 99%.**

**MM:** Partly through ego, but also, in my case, I spent the first 18 months thinking I would get 18 months. After that, I felt I was in a groove and I felt I was up to the job. I felt I was doing a good job. But I also knew I wasn't close to Nick and I would be expendable, if he could find somebody else to do the job. Well, eventually, that moment came.

But there was no review or informal assessment ever. I never sat down with the Chief Whip, Nick or David Laws or any group that Nick could have set up and asked, 'What is your plan? What are your objectives as a department? What are your objectives in media terms? How are you going to feed that back into the party? Right, let's agree with what you are going to do. And then, in three months' time, we are going to meet again.' You know, I have come from and gone back to an environment [in management consultancy] where, every three months, you are sitting down [and having this conversation]. I mean, the first thing I did, three weeks ago, was sit down with the guy I am working most closely with and took the role specification I have got and turned it into something much more granular. So he and I both know what it is that will inform the judgement as to how I am doing in three months' time. There is nothing even approaching that in government (or indeed politics).

You are never going to strip out the reality that politics plays the biggest part. Cameron or Clegg or even Corbyn sit there and they have to allocate portfolios. They have all sorts of things to balance out and you will get ministers who will be regarded as under-performing but can't be sacked. You will get others who do brilliantly but, because they don't have political weight in the party, they can go. So there are limitations. I am not saying you should bring a corporate model of accountability and you will sort all the problems. And we, as a party, I don't think ever even, not in small groups or in a big group, sat down and said, 'Right, how have we done? Let's be honest to ourselves. What has worked? What hasn't worked and what the hell do we need to get done in the next three months?'

I think that in terms of the support mechanisms, I just think it is a reality that you need to equip every department with a decent number of special advisers. I had one. He worked his socks off. I could have kept three or four very busy in the entire time I was there.

One other issue springs to mind: nowhere— the Cabinet Office or whoever ultimately decides things — should tolerate second-rate private offices, for their own wellbeing never mind the wellbeing of the department. Because a minister will under-perform if the wrong people are there. And that is where I was slow to grasp what could be possible. I just thought I had to live with what I had. I quickly sussed I wasn't terribly happy with it, and over time it sharpened up and became more professional and became more savvy. But it took a long time to do that. And I do think that, considering they are meant to be the eyes and the ears of the minister, but clearly also the Civil Service, you know, this is one thing they could fix. Because the performance you could get out of smaller departments, if you put a bright Treasury person into the Scotland Office or DECC [Department of Energy & Climate Change] or wherever, for a year and helped them to set the pace for the minister, the department and everything else, that would be very useful to all.

**JG: Do you have any advice for anyone coming into the role for the first time? Anything you would pass on?**

**MM:** Develop your support network quickly, don't lost touch with people outside the department, and have a ball. You know, without being mean about anything else I have done in the past or will do in the future, I think I will struggle to replicate the fantastic three and a half years that I had. I was fortunate to get the chance. I was also fortunate to get the chance in that department, at that point in time. We had a bill, we had the Edinburgh Agreement, we had loads of other stuff going on. As and when I get writing my dull book, I hopefully can do justice to all that. But no, you have got to enjoy yourself otherwise it would be a pretty miserable way of passing the time.

## Citations

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