

Ministers reflect

Ben Bradshaw



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Ben Bradshaw – biographical details

Electoral History

1997-present: Member of Parliament for Exeter

Parliamentary Career

May-Oct 2010: Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and Shadow Deputy Prime Minister)

2009-2010: Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

2007-2009: Minister of State for Regional Affairs (South West)

2007-2009: Minister of State for Health Services

2006-2007: Minister of State for Local Environment, Marine and Animal Welfare

2003-2006: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Local Environment, Marine and Animal Welfare

2002-2003: Parliamentary Secretary (Privy Council Office)

2001-2002: Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)

Ben Bradshaw was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Ines Stelk on 13th September 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): I think it was 2001 you first became a minister. What was your experience of first starting in a ministerial role like?

Ben Bradshaw (BB): Oh, it's quite difficult to remember that long back! That was in the Foreign Office, which at the time had a reputation for being a very tight and professional operation, staffed with particularly able civil servants. I think probably it was in that job that I had my first experience of a problem that you can encounter as a minister, where the combination really of the chemistry of the personalities [was] not working with my Principal Private Secretary – but also having a Principal Private Secretary who felt his job was to defend the department against me, rather than to help me deliver the government's policy, get the department to deliver the government's policy and to make those things work together. But that was addressed and resolved.

NH: Did you feel that you were able to step in and make changes?

BB: I was very grateful to the advice of my brother-in-law who is a former senior civil servant who was very clear to me that it's entirely up to me who staffs my private office. 'You're the minister, you're elected you have a choice...' – but it's very, very difficult for a rookie, junior, green minister faced with that kind of structure to force your will through and you also, I think, need to be very aware of the danger of getting a reputation as a difficult minister who doesn't get on with people and who can't work with anybody. So for me it was about getting that balance right. And in those days there was absolutely no training or induction for ministers: you sank or you swam, and I had to learn on the job. I learnt how best to deal [with] and manage my workload and my private offices through experience and through watching how other ministers managed theirs, and how some did it well and how some did it not so well. So I really could try to – magpie-like – learn from best practice, pick up from best practice.

I had a similar personnel problem in my Department of Health office. I just remember thinking at the time – I'd won one battle over one important appointment on arriving in the department – and I just thought: 'You have to choose your battles that you have with the Civil Service.' But overall I found the civil servants of very high calibre – if you were clear about what you wanted and what your priorities were and you gave them things to deliver, they would do it. And I welcomed the challenge and I generally had very good relationships, very loyal and close relationships with my civil servants. That culminated really in my last job as Culture Secretary, reaching what I would call the ideal of how it should work, where I had a superb private office and between me, my private secretaries and my special advisers, we basically ran the department. We got things done and sorted out the problems – and there were quite a few - bypassing the Permanent Secretary if necessary. It was a badly underperforming department when I arrived, failing on a number of its Whitehall performance benchmark measurements. Within ten months we'd got that turned around...

NH: Did you feel able in that situation, as the minister, to get involved in the more managerial, organisational side of things?

BB: I didn't need to. Because I had such a superb private office and my private office, particularly my principal private secretary, absolutely understood what needed to happen and in fact they had been quite frustrated by the state the department was in and welcomed having someone come in and say "Right, let's get on and sort this out" and they used my authority as Secretary of State to make things happen. And they also had a very good relationship with my special adviser – I was very fortunate that

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my private office staff and my departments always had very good relationships with my special advisers, who I think managed the relationships very well, were very trusted and people understood that if my special adviser said something it was like me saying it, basically.

NH: And the special advisers, had they been in the department before?

BB: Two had been in the department before and one I brought with me. I inherited two superb policy special advisers and the other political one I brought with me.

NH: And just to pick up on a couple of things you were saying, so first you mentioned picking up examples of good practice from other ministers. Were there any individuals that you thought 'That's a really great minister' and what was it that they were doing that was so effective?

BB: I wouldn't say that there is such a thing as the perfect Minister. What I tried to do in the absence of any formal training, induction or anything else, was as a junior minister to assess the effectiveness of the different secretaries of state I worked with. And also fellow ministers in terms of how they conducted the meetings, how they managed crises, how they delivered policy objectives and so forth and what I did was try to adopt the best practices that I observed.

Margaret Beckett was quite a regal figure in her department [at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)], she was very well loved and respected by her private office and she was very effective and commanded huge loyalty, but she operated in quite a traditional, hierarchical and distant way from the rest of us junior ministers. But she was not unapproachable if I really needed her approval or to bother her about something. But she was not interfering. She let you get on with the job as long as you didn't mess up. Alan Johnson, again, was a great secretary of state, very successful at [the Department of] Health. The last great Health Secretary we had at a time when the NHS was really motoring, loved by the service and by the staff, but also challenging. He focussed on the things that really mattered and, once he felt he could trust you, let you get on with your job. Both Margaret and Alan had superb special advisers, which is so important.

There was one incident at Health where having Alan's support and trust was critical. I tried in almost every job I did to take my private office on an away-day to my constituency, because one of the things that surprisingly enough, not very many civil servants seem to realise, is that your ministerial job is only one of your jobs. You have a job as a constituency MP, you have a job as a party representative and you have a family. I very soon discovered that on my constituency Fridays for example, my inbox would fill up with scores of demands and requests to approve policy documents and press quotes and so on. Anyone who understands what an MP's constituency Friday is like would realise is completely impossible. So I found that taking my private office and the civil servants to my constituency, getting them to sit on surgeries, follow me around for the day and have some down time in Exeter was really helpful as well as a bonding experience. They knew what it was like in theory but... Anyway, the then Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health tried to stop this happening, worried it would fail what he called "The Daily Mail test" on the use of public money, even though I had done it in every previous job. Well, I happened to know that Alan Johnson had done exactly the same thing the month before, so anyway, that battle was won.

David Miliband was inspirational strategically, full of ideas and intellectually demanding. It was his first Secretary of State's job and they [Defra] loved his energy and strategic drive and clarity. He taught me the importance of having clear political and strategic priorities in order to get the most out of the machine. So what I basically tried to do in the jobs that I did was to co-opt the best elements of all of those people I worked for and with, while trying to avoid any negatives I observed.

It may sound funny but one of the most valuable things I did as a minister was when Tony Blair decided that – I don't know whether this was part of some attempt to professionalise or improve the capacity of ministers and the functionality of ministerial teams – but Tony Blair, you may or may not know, decided or issued an edict that we were all, all departments, I don't know whether the Cabinet did this, were to do a proper Myers Briggs test. And I'd never done anything like this before. And we all dutifully did it in Defra and I have to say it's one of the most useful things I've ever done, not only in terms of helping me improve the way that I interacted with my private office, but with other people generally and even with my husband! This is basic stuff in many sectors but was a first for politicians. I'll always be grateful for it as it gave me important insight as to how I behaved in meetings, how I interact with other people generally and how other ministers behaved in meetings, made decisions etc. Sadly we never completed it as a ministerial team, I think because Margaret never got round to doing it. So we never did the collective get-back-together and work out how we could improve the functionality of the ministerial team. But at least an attempt was made and certainly for myself I found it really useful.

NH: Can you remember what your type was? [laughter]

BB: Not the exact type - but it was mild introvert (which surprised me) of the type commonly found in politics, business, etcetera - "thruster producer" or something like that. I was a mild introvert who was results-driven, who sometimes didn't listen and involve other people enough, who knew what I wanted. I would think things over in my own mind before making a decision about them, rather than necessarily asking too many questions or involving other people. I've done the test - a simpler version - again more recently and, apparently, I've moved a bit - closer to my husband's type, which I'm told is quite common.

NH: Yeah, I'd love to see a breakdown of Parliament by Myers Briggs! So, let's talk about reshuffles and moving on to different departments. You climbed up the ministerial ladder a bit, as it were, did each job come with extra responsibilities? What was the difference between the roles?

BB: Not really. I think one of Tony's mistakes was to move people around too often and too much and I have to say, one of Cameron's pluses was keeping good people in portfolios, particularly at secretary of state level. I can completely understand the rationale for moving ministers, junior ministers, around to broaden their experience and I certainly am not complaining about the fact that I did a year at the Foreign Office, a year at the Privy Council, because that gave me invaluable experience. Four years as a junior minister at Defra felt a little bit too long at the time.

I think for junior ministers four years is probably enough while anything less than two years is not long enough because it's only really after two years, particularly as a junior minister, that you know enough to be fully effective and to challenge the civil servants and ask the questions that need to be asked. Obviously you can ask the right basic questions from day one, but I think you're at your most effective when you're at least a year and a half or two years into a job. And I was always slightly suspicious about the tendency to move junior ministers around too regularly and after a short time in the job, because it made us easier to manage and was therefore convenient for the machine. Maybe that's a bit too conspiratorial about the machine, but I certainly think as a rule, there's an argument for keeping secretaries of state in jobs for a good period... And there's also an argument for moving people on after a while, because there's always a danger that you end up going native and seeing the whole world through the prism of the Home Office or whatever and you don't see the bigger picture. I always had a marginal seat, which made me more political and less administrative as a minister. I think that helped inure me to departmental capture.

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NH: Did you know any of your moves were coming? Or were you ever able to express, particularly I suppose when you became a secretary of state, ‘This is the department I would really like’?

BB: No. I always considered it a huge and unexpected privilege to be an MP, let alone a government minister. After I'd been a minister at the most junior level - PUS [Parliamentary Under-Secretary] for six years and four years in Defra, having managed two major animal health crises and various other things, I may have mentioned gently to Tony's political secretary, 'Wouldn't mind a move.' But I wasn't into making demands or being difficult. Gordon promoted me to Number 2 at Health when he took over in 2007. It was very late in the reshuffle and came out of the blue while I was on a boat on Loch Ness. Reshuffle calls always seemed to come through when I was in unusual places. The following year, which was one of those reshuffles which was held up apparently by one or more of my colleagues remonstrating about their "bad treatment" Gordon rang me up. I was having a sing along in a piano bar in Mykonos and he rang me up to apologise for the fact that he wasn't moving or promoting me. I said 'Gordon, don't be ridiculous, I've only been doing this job a year and I'm very happy doing it, it's the best job' – when I was eventually promoted to the Cabinet in summer 2009 when James Purnell resigned, it was a completely unexpected thing. It wasn't anything that was ever offered or promised, I didn't try to negotiate around it.

NH: When you did get to a new department, I suppose particularly at DCMS [Department for Culture, Media and Sport], where you were in control of the whole thing, how did you establish your priorities in those departments? How did you get your head round a new brief?

BB: I sat down with my private office, took a look at the departmental report and what was red, amber, green. It was ten months before a general election, so I knew that my tenure was not going to be a tenure to develop and announce shiny, all-singing-and-dancing policy initiatives, but it was going to be about trying to sort out the department's performance in the few months I had in the run-up to a general election and deal with a couple of really big ticket items. For example top of my in-tray was a recommendation that we withdraw funding for the Tate Modern extension and the British Museum extension, because of the financial state that the department was in. This carried huge reputational implications for the department and – I don't know if you've been to the new Tate Modern extension – but for the country as a whole. So basically my main priority in those few months was to fight the necessary battles within government with the Chancellor and the Prime Minister in particular to get the money to keep those projects going. There were also more mundane but important things like the fact that our correspondence record was dreadful – we didn't respond to letters quickly, we took weeks, months to respond to letters. Basic stuff like that. The Department of Health, which I'd come from, had had a similar problem, which we'd sorted out, so I simply asked the civil servant across from the Department of Health, who'd just retired, to do the same for DCMS – it wasn't rocket science. So in the few months in the run-up to an election my priority was to finish unfinished business and address any outstanding problems in the department.

NH: And did you ever do sort of a handover meeting or anything like that?

BB: No, there was no proper handover. I might have grabbed a few minutes. Your successor is generally moving on to a new job too and they are trying to go their heads around that. But you inherit their private office, so there is continuity and they can brief you up quickly.

NH: And just to pick up on one more thing, you mentioned trying to wrangle money out of the Treasury – how did you find working with the Treasury and Number 10, particularly as a secretary of state?

BB: Fine. I chose my moments to speak to Gordon and Alistair carefully. The formal stuff was all done through my special adviser and the Number 10 special adviser, Stewart Wood, who we had a very good relationship with, I had a good relationship with and my special adviser had a good relationship with. We didn't go through the Permanent Secretary. I knew this would be a political decision, given money was tight after the 2008 financial crisis. I chose my moments to impress on Gordon and Alistair the importance of these projects for Britain, informally in the margins of, I think it was probably social, or semi-social gatherings at Number 10 or 11 Downing Street, rather than firing off emails or bothering them when they were busy on bigger things. And in Alistair's case through Maggie, his wife, who I knew to be a huge culture vulture and supporter of the arts, so whether that had any effect on that, I don't know! [laughter]

Ines Stelk (IS): Just thinking about the different roles that you had as a minister, and balancing Parliament and your departmental duties – how did you spend most of your time?

BB: Most of my time I would spend reading submissions, preparing for parliamentary scrutiny, so all questions, debates and select committee hearings. Having done the job as Deputy Leader of the House in the Privy Council, the real value of that job was to instil in me how important Parliament was and how important it was to take Parliament seriously, which was another thing which sometimes the civil servants needed really drilling into them. Some ministers would turn up to select committees or the Chamber badly prepared. I used to treat select committee hearings like my final exams. Parliament really matters. And visits, I always thought it was very important to try to get out of the Westminster bubble on visits. Defra – a lot of negotiation, EU Council negotiation. We had the British presidency while I was at in Defra, which meant a lot of negotiation and pre-negotiation. Mad to chair the notorious pre-Christmas Fisheries Council, for example.

We had various crises while I was there: I think I just missed foot-and-mouth [disease], but bird flu, bovine TB [tuberculosis] on-going, floods. So various examples of where we were basically staffing a 24/7 operation, dealing with a crisis, attending Cobra [Cabinet Office Briefing Room A] meetings, things like that. Media: with my former journalistic background I was very conscious of messaging, so I think probably compared with a lot of ministers, I would insist on clearing every single quote that went out in my name. I developed quite close relationships with the head of press or whoever it was in each of the departments. I did a lot of media in each of the departments I was in, but also I did a lot of cross-government media for both Tony and Gordon, so I did a lot of Question Time, a lot of Any Questions - that sort of thing. I did a lot on the Hutton Inquiry, even though it was not in my departmental remit – I helped Number 10 because I'd been a minister for a year when 9/11 happened and as a former BBC staffer I'd followed the whole Andrew Gilligan report controversy very closely and I knew the detail, so I was used a lot to do that. So, I had a really eclectic and wide ranging ministerial experience. Trying to think if there's anything I particularly forgot. Meetings obviously, quite a lot of meetings, although so many meetings can be unnecessary and wasteful. And, you know, I've never been one to have meetings for the sake of it.

IS: And just following on from that, you mentioned a few crises at Defra. Could you talk us through an occasion when a crisis hit and how you saw your role as a minister in handling that?

BB: Yeah. I suppose there are two examples that stand out for me. One was bird flu, where at the time there was a lot of public and media hysteria and a certain amount of political concern that this could cross over into human beings and, you know, we had shut-downs. Because I had, as a backbencher, been very closely involved with the foot-and-mouth outbreak, and the government had learned a lot of very helpful and useful lessons from the foot-and-mouth outbreak, we had quite good systems in Defra to

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manage these crises. I also knew that – I was Animal Health Minister – that as a minister you had to stay completely on top of all of the detail and that these crises can move on and change from one minute to the next. You never know where they're going to go. So it's a lot of very long hours, a lot of stamina, a lot of supporting and encouraging the troops – but also staying calm. I think the bird flu thing must have happened at a time when David replaced Margaret, because David came in, it was his first secretary of state job and you could see that he thought 'God, this could destroy my career, if this isn't managed effectively', so actually a lot of my role then, a lot of my energy and time then was spent supporting him, helping reassure him that the department was on top of things and he didn't need to worry too much.

At Health we had, within a very good health story, we had the Mid Staffs hospital problems, or the Healthcare Commission Report into what went wrong there was initiated, and I think published, while I was the minister responsible for the NHS – and I gave evidence to the public enquiry later – so that again was something where the potential for reputational damage to the NHS, but also for real harm to be done to people if lessons weren't learnt, was huge. So again, it involved really bringing together the best teams of people to make sure that you are on top of an issue, that you are ahead of the media pack, that there were no surprises, that you were briefed in a timely fashion, and also that you as a minister were always asking the right questions. I remember when I first saw the submission on Mid Staffs, once I'd absorbed the shock, I sat down and spent two or three hours compiling a long e-mail with about 70 questions - all the questions that I could imagine might be asked. It was not my usual habit to write long emails, but they were the questions that we needed answers to. Dealing with crises can be very good experience. Defra and Health are good training grounds in this regard.

IS: And what do you feel was your greatest achievement in office or something you're most proud of?

BB: It's really difficult to point to a single, particular decision I took or a recommendation that I countermanded which stands out – also because almost everything you achieve as a Minister is achieved collectively and so even though I took the animal welfare bill through to be an act, which was at the time the most ground breaking animal welfare legislation anywhere in the world, most of that I inherited from my predecessor. We made huge strides on marine protection and again, that was something I felt passionately about and drove forward very strongly. But it was picked up from my predecessor and without really good and committed officials it wouldn't have been able to be delivered. Saving the Tate Modern and the British Museum extensions were also gratifying. But, I would rather be remembered as somebody who did a competent job and made progress in a number of areas and didn't mess up.

NH: Did you have a sense of working as a team, maybe with your ministerial team?

BB: Yes, in Health for example, when I was there 2007 to 2009, I suppose in a way the best legacy that we left from that period was the highest ever public satisfaction with the NHS and the lowest ever waiting times. And that is not something that, it's not a single thing which I can claim credit for, but it's something that we had built up for, during the previous years, and we delivered while I was in the department and those were all around the main political objectives that we'd set ourselves as a government.

You can't do these things without working as a team and without a collective effort and without someone having done some of the groundwork. It's very unusual, particularly in the short space of time in a department to come in and start something, initiate it and see it through to completion. An old family friend who has a spaniel likes to say: 'The best thing you ever did was ban the docking of dogs tails', so there you go. If someone wants to remember me as the minister who made sure dogs could keep their tails, [laughter] I've done something to increase doggy and dog owners' happiness, that's fair enough,

but speaking personally it wouldn't be the thing that I was necessarily most proud of.

NH: It can be the title of your autobiography.

BB: I never kept a diary, so sadly that's not on the cards.

NH: We just want to pick up on a couple of more topical things. Firstly, you mentioned earlier select committees and preparing to do those, you're busy now on the other side of the benches – do you think having done both roles has made you more effective at scrutinising ministers?

BB: Definitely. Oh, infinitely, knowing how departments work and knowing what ministers roles are, is very helpful in terms of testing ministers and asking ministers the relevant questions. And I sometimes used to groan at the size of my box for the following week or the following few days and the parliamentary demands, but in the end I always used to consider it a really useful and valuable part of briefing, because if you can make a case and defend your position in Parliament, that's a pretty good start. And so good ministers should welcome that scrutiny. I remember I had to do the second reading of the Digital Economy Bill on my second day as Culture Secretary and I knew absolutely nothing about this bill when I was appointed. I did my best to get up on the most of its contents and what the potential controversial areas were. But in the end, sometimes as a minister you just have to say 'Look I'm terribly sorry, I've only been in the job 48 hours and forgive me' – and actually MPs are pretty understanding about stuff like that. The same as select committees. So if we get a new minister who is before a select committee, we're not trying to trip them up unfairly or unnecessarily – or most of us aren't – we're trying to get information out of them that is relevant and hopefully encourage them to do their jobs a bit better.

NH: The IfG is doing some work on the EU at the moment, so we're interested... I think when you were at Defra you did some EU negotiations. What are your tips for ministers on how to negotiate with foreign counterparts?

BB: Well, it helps if you speak foreign languages for a start. Don't underestimate the importance of human relationships. We achieved significant things because of the relationships that Margaret Beckett and the rest of her ministerial team developed with her counterparts in the various councils, in terms of building alliances. Speaking German and Italian to my German and Italian counterparts in fisheries or environmental negotiations was really valuable. But the challenge of negotiating good deals and progress on things like the marine environment or agriculture – the EU sugar regime are nothing compared with the challenge facing today's ministers negotiating Brexit, when it's going to be one against 27. I mean, the mind boggles. I just think they are completely unprepared and in most cases unqualified to do this. So I would feel for them, if it wasn't their fault that we're in that position.

NH: I suppose Defra is quite a regulation heavy department, so how much did the EU come into your life as a minister? Were you dealing with the EU quite a lot?

BB: Yeah, from memory, we would have Agricultural, Fisheries Councils pretty much every month either in Brussels or Luxembourg. And you'd have to travel to those. To be perfectly frank, I found the experience, I mean the annual Fisheries Council is supposedly one of the most gruelling experiences that anyone ever goes to, because it's three days and nights without sleep until you get a deal and it's always before Christmas, so that people know they have to go home, so they have to reach a deal. I'd never negotiated anything else before in my life before I was doing EU negotiations for the British Government so it was a very, very steep learning curve, but a very, very good experience. And again, watching Margaret Beckett, a real pro, was very helpful and instructive. Again, you are fantastically supported

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by UKRep [UK Permanent Representation to the European Union] and we have – it's a tragedy - we have the best civil servants in Brussels of any country, they are hugely effective for their size and we bat way above our weight. All that's about to be thrown away, sadly.

NH: We just have a couple more questions if that's OK. So was there anything you found frustrating about being a minister? We mentioned achievements but was there anything you would change about government, on reflection?

BB: I think certainly as a junior minister you are in a constant battle over your diary. I mean it can be an absolutely relentless treadmill, because of course junior ministers work much, much harder than Cabinet ministers. They do all the less glamorous work, they do all the committee stages of the bills, they do the parliamentary debates, they do all the adjournment debates and they get passed all the 2nd ticket items to do by their secretary of state, so the demands on their time are incredible. And it's very difficult for them, if they are being asked to do something by the secretary of state, to say 'No'. So, and what I found difficult and/or frustrating was the difficulty in timing in thinking time, brainstorming time, discussion time, sitting back and taking a strategic view time, because so much of it was around firefighting, dealing with the day-to-day stuff. I think I understood that much better once I became a secretary of state, I was the one who was delegating stuff and I could focus on the big important things. And I also had more time to think across government politically. Although it was quite a short tenure, because [it was] in the run-up to the 2010 election. Yeah, the battle over the diary is the biggest thing. And of course when you start off as an inexperienced minister you want to say yes to everything, you want to please everybody, you want to do your best. And [that combined with] the complete lack then of any sort of induction or training or professional development. The civil servants were constantly going off on away-days to wherever it is, the Civil Service College or away-weeks or even longer periods of time. Ministers got none of that. It was literally sink or swim.

NH: Why do you think that is – is it just a political reality or a matter of nobody there to organise it? I mean, would it work?

BB: I think there were real and genuine attempts to improve things under Tony Blair and come to think about it, was it Michael Barber who came in?

NH: Yes. He did all the delivery stuff.

BB: Yeah. And some of that saw the light of day. I think there was a huge improvement in delivery through our second and third terms. But I don't know. I don't know what the reason is. You need to ask people in more senior positions than me, people like permanent secretaries, cabinet secretaries and prime ministers why they don't do this kind of stuff.

NH: Are there any other final bits of advice you would offer to a new minister?

BB: Make sure that you have a private office that works well for you. Don't be shy at making sure that happens, but also recognise that the Civil Service, good civil servants are there to help you deliver for the government and if you can make that work it becomes a really fantastic resource and relationship.

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