

Ministers reflect

Tessa Jowell

July 2016



Tessa Jowell – biographical details

Electoral History

2015-present: Labour Member of the House of Lords

1997-2015: Member of Parliament for Dulwich and West Norwood

1992-1997: Member of Parliament for Dulwich

Parliamentary Career

Jan-Oct 2011: Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office

May-Oct 2010: Shadow Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office and Shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

2010-2012: Shadow Minister of State for the Olympics and Shadow Minister of State for London

2009-2010: Minister of State for Regional Affairs and Minister of State for London

2007-2010: Minister of State for the Olympics and Paymaster General

2001-2007: Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

1999-2001: Minister of State for Work and Pensions

1999-2001: Minister of State for Education and Employment and Minister of State for Women

1997-1999: Minister of State for Public Health

1996-1997: Shadow Spokesperson on Health

1995-1996: Shadow Spokesperson on Women

1994-1995: Opposition Whip (Commons) and Shadow Spokesperson on Health

Tessa Jowell was interviewed by Peter Riddell and Nicola Hughes on 12th July 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Peter Riddell (PR): What preparation did you have for being a minister, you'd obviously been a councillor, you'd been involved in a charity, what preparation did you have for being a minister?

Tessa Jowell (TJ): I think that I had been well prepared by virtue of the fact that I had senior management roles in local government and the voluntary sector; I had a research consultancy role at the King's Fund. I was overseeing, for four years, a major change programme in the way a major local authority delivered care to vulnerable elderly people and that built on the work I'd done while I was at Mind [the mental health charity], running residential services, running advisory services. So, I was very familiar with and comfortable with high-level managerial responsibility. Also I'd been a councillor, so I knew both local representation and the big strategic change. I chaired different committees in Camden from 1972 right through to 1984. Social services twice, housing, staff – so again, I was well experienced in the executive chairmanship that you exercise as a leading member of the local council.

Nothing quite prepares you for being a minister though. In the run-up to 1997 we went through various induction programmes at Templeton College in Oxford and there are two things that conspire against pre-election training being very helpful. One is just raw superstition: "I can't engage with this too much because (a) we might not win the election and (b) if we win the election, I might not be a minister at all and therefore I will have invested so much in this and it will come to nothing." That was slightly the experience in 2015 when I'd worked with a lot of ministers to prepare them for government then.

Instead of talking about preparation, let me just talk a little bit about the sense of incompetence you feel when you arrive. So, day one, day two, day three. I knew a lot about health policy. It had been what I'd done for years before I became a member of parliament and then I'd been a shadow health minister in opposition. Even so when I opened my box on the first night, I was a minister and there was a submission; it was about 70 pages long about antibiotic resistance and micro-bacterial immunity, which was falling. I looked at it and thought – well, I didn't understand most of it – and I was asked at the end if I was prepared to approve the recommendations. It's some time since I've been asked a question and thought 'I have no idea what the answer is and I don't know how to busk it!'

The expectations when you become a minister assume that you're on top of the general skill-set that is required: leadership, team building – a crucial skill for successful delivery and often ill at ease with the rivalry and competition of politics – being able to absorb and deploy complex information and be on top of the detail, to separate the important from the urgent, the focus on what are the real priorities of the department rather than things that you may be particularly interested in and also maintaining the capacity to build alliances with Number 10 and with other departments. All those are the kind of competences that I understand in my retrofitted memory of being a minister, rather than being aware of at the time. So, I think the first thing is just getting used to – it doesn't matter how high a level you worked at before – just not knowing the answers. Then, I think, having enough self-confidence to recruit people in the department to help you understand and while doing that, never forgetting the politics, because what you can't be is just an administering minister. There are very, very few jobs in government that are simply about administration, disconnected from the politics.

So that was what the early days were like. Of course, they were interlaced with this extraordinary headiness of having won and being in government and not quite believing that and also the sense of joy that there was in the Department of Health to have a public health minister who could address the things that many of the civil servants felt passionate about: health inequality and the extent to which whole population health could prevent and mitigate that.

4 Ministers reflect

PR: How were the civil servants actually, given that your job was a different one than they were used to?

TJ: It was a completely new one. The role of Public Health Minister was essentially defined as the political counterpart to the Chief Medical Officer. Actually, it was bigger and broader than that, because the role of Public Health Minister incorporated every policy that impacted on health, [was] detrimental to health improvement – so the quality of air, transport, what children ate at school, whether they played sport at school, whether people were equipped with the skills that gave them the capacity to get into work and hold down a job. So all these factors went way beyond the core purpose of the Department of Health, and that was really what was different. So, being Public Health Minister required my getting on top of policy content but then also building quite complex and innovative means of policy implementation. Policy or departmental silos could not tackle health inequality and its multiple causes.

PR: Yes and particularly on ‘Sure Start’, which was interesting because it would cross departmental activity and Whitehall doesn’t like cross-departmental things partly because of separate costs and budgets. How did you manage that?

TJ: Yes, you need a sponsor and a patron in order to do something difficult and innovative like that. My sponsor was Gordon Brown and my patron was David Blunkett [then Education and Employment Secretary]. The idea of Sure Start is something that I conceived on the strength of my own experience of the invaluable influence of health visiting. David and I had a passionate sense of common cause in developing Sure Start. It drew heavily on a successful national voluntary organisation well known to David Blunkett called Home-Start which provided support for new parents. So that was how it all started, but in a way, government at that time found it very difficult to deal with a description of policy which was about relationships, which Sure Start essentially was – building good and nurturing relationships between mothers and their new babies. I think government is better at that now, I think the world is more emotionally literate now than it was. So I was dealing in a sort of new commodity or alchemy of public policy, which is relationships. That also then became quite complicated because, you know, all the charges of the nanny state and you can’t interfere with private lives and private judgments – so managing that public health policy was another dimension, a constantly moving part.

Bill Clinton as US President was able to make school attendance, primary school attendance conditional on children being vaccinated. Just try doing that here! When I go to Harvard to teach at the School for Public Health and [the] Kennedy [School] later this year, I have called the programme that I’m teaching to post-graduate master’s students, ‘Why do we know so much and do so little’. Starting with the evidence isn’t enough. The evidence then has to be tempered by policy priority of the government, but also the other geopolitical considerations about the role of communities, personal responsibilities and so forth.

PR: How does Number 10 impact on that? You mentioned the backing of Gordon, but you had to navigate Number 10 and the Treasury...?

TJ: In many ways, Gordon was much more a facilitator of these policies than Tony was, because Tony, at that stage, was very watchful and mindful of the Daily Mail. We could have brought down the teenage pregnancy rate much more quickly if we hadn’t had the Daily Mail on our backs. We could have probably accelerated Sure Start. So that was very much in the zeitgeist of Number 10 at the time, as you will remember.

Nicola Hughes (NH): What about reshuffles – so, your first one, did you know you were going to be moved?

TJ: Well, I’d forgotten this and it’s in one of the books about that time. We were elected in 1997, I became Public Health Minister and was beginning to set up Sure Start and to set up a really ambitious

set of policies for the prevention of avoidable death from cancer and heart disease. And I was asked, in the run up to the 1998 reshuffle, if I would go into the Cabinet and I look back on it and think ‘How on earth did I dare say “No”?’ I said ‘No’ because I don’t feel ready, because the policies that I’m just putting in place here are policies which are very new, they’re very fragile and they need consistency; they need me to get them to a point where they’re firmly and clearly established and – again, this is retrofitted wisdom – it was one of the wisest things I’ve ever done. I think that there’s a very interesting distinction between ministers whose policies have longevity and those who are remembered as Cabinet ministers who did lots of jobs, but you can’t remember what they did in any job. I had a similar experience when I was doing the Olympics, when Tony Blair regularly said ‘I’d like to promote you’ and once we’d won the Olympic bid, I was absolutely clear that I wanted to see the Olympics through. Actually, it was before that, it was about 2002/2003. I said ‘But only if I can do the Olympics as well’ and actually, the Olympics was becoming so big you couldn’t do it with any other portfolio. So, I’ll always be proud that I was the minister that set up Sure Start and the secretary of state who did the Olympics for ten years. It is so rare in public life to be able to see through policies from start to finish, but what made the Olympics the success it was, was the consistency, continuity and trust of the relationships between the key players and that would have been destabilised if I’d gone off to another job.

NH: It was also with the Olympics that you did quite a lot of cross-party working...

TJ: Yes. I think that was the other important thing and I think because I was just a bit older and a bit more experienced, I wasn’t afraid of doing things in a cross-party way and the way you build resilience in policy is to have the good sense to build at least cross-party principles on which the policy grows... It’s small in the scale of things but one of the things that I’m very sad about is that our exemplary schools sports programme was so easily swept away in 2010 and it did have cross-party support and I don’t know what more I could have done to embed it and make it invincible, because it was doing everything that the successor government would have wanted, but it was a bit of ridiculous ideology actually, by Michael Gove [then Education Secretary].

NH: Did each role that you did feel very different? How did you find the departments compared?

TJ: Well, I went from [the Department of] Health to... Alan Milburn [then Health Secretary] and I were counterparts and we were very good friends, but we were very competitive with each other. [laughter] We were equally ambitious for what we were trying to do and then I went to the Department of Education and Employment and worked with David Blunkett and I enjoyed that a lot, but I didn’t have the same ownership of the policy because by then the New Deal was well-established, it was Gordon Brown’s brainchild and it had largely done its work. I was also Women’s Minister and I did quite a lot of European negotiation and I was incredibly proud of the success I achieved in that, in particular negotiating the basis for the Equalities Act, which was Article 13, as it was then called, and that established the basis on which the equalities legislation was then developed.

Then in 2001, I joined the Cabinet and I remember seeing the Prime Minister and he said ‘I’d like you to go to DCMS’ [Department for Culture, Media and Sport] and he told me what the priorities were: cross-media ownership and sorting out a catalogue of big problems that the department had in relation to three big projects. So I was very happy with that, but I also realised that although this was not a big mainstream department, it handled some of the most difficult things, you know, which nobody would notice until they went wrong and then they were on the front page of every newspaper as a proxy to whoever was having a go against a particular bit of government at the time.

So, I knew that there were certain conditions under which I could be successful. Take cross-media ownership – when I went to see the Prime Minister a few days after having been appointed, the two most difficult things I had to do were new rules for cross-media ownership and sorting out Wembley, the national football stadium which was a complete shambles. When I saw him I said on Wembley, ‘Don’t

6 Ministers reflect

see the FA [Football Association] because if they think they can come and see you or Alastair Campbell [then No 10 Director of Communications], they'll always do that rather than negotiating with me.' So – 'I can sort this out if you give me an undertaking that you won't see them' and he gave that immediately. We had a pretty bloody negotiation with the FA and, had to face them down basically and they were unspeakable. We had a Lottery grant of £120 million in the Wembley project and they were threatening to liquidate the holding company which held this £120 million, which means we would have lost £120 million worth of Lottery money. I remember saying to the FA in the middle of the night – because the whole issue was, 'You expect the government to pay for this but it is a national football stadium, you've got to pay for it' – and in the middle of the night, with low blood sugar, I said to him in exasperation 'What you've got to understand is that you've got a secretary of state who doesn't give a f*** whether there is a national football stadium or not. If there is going to be a national football stadium, the FA are going to pay for it, but the government is not.' I thought the first thing they would do is go down to Number 10 and say 'Sack that woman!' – I don't know if they did, but certainly three or four days later, we reached agreement.

Then the second was cross-media ownership which was much, much more difficult. And I saw the Prime Minister, me and him, and I looked at him and I said 'Have you done a deal with Rupert Murdoch on possible ownership?' and he looked me in the eye and said 'No, I haven't, there is no deal' and I said 'Well, in that case, don't see him, I'm not going to see him and I will bring you proposals and we will have a proper policy process.' You know, I was experienced enough to know the importance of that and creating an audit trail. And that saw us in very good stead because when I gave evidence to [the] Leveson [Inquiry] and when he wrote his report, he described the process of negotiating cross-media ownership as properly conducted piece of policy making. We brought forward proposals, I took them to Cabinet, we agreed them, and it is as simple as that really.

PR: What was quality of the civil service advice like when you got to these very tricky business problems?

TJ: Variable. I mean, some were outstanding. I think I was greatly fortified in DCMS, again, because I understood so much more about how the Civil Service worked. They have confidence in you if they know that you will stand up for them and not blame them. Also, the other thing I'd done was when I became Secretary of State, each summer I arranged my own summer school. So that the first summer I was Secretary of State, I did, I believe it was ten days at the London Business School, learning more from experts about the economic sectors that I was now Secretary of State for. I also did also a session on leadership there and that really was what encouraged me to turn my private office much more into a 'cabinet', rather than just a private office of people who stapled the submissions together and put them in your box. I trained them very carefully and for about 18 months I had the best administrative machine that was possible to imagine. The brightest, the most committed to me, systematic and we just got through a hell of a lot. We had a very big and difficult legislative programme and that was when we were just beginning to think about the Olympics and do all that very early preparation.

So, I felt that in a way I created a lot of my own fortune because I made sure I kept on learning more and nobody tells you these kinds of things. I went talent spotting for my private secretaries and I used to teach them to read the submissions, do me a box note that would be a summary and the key decisions that had to be taken; and also that by reading the submissions, they were a filter and if they weren't in line with what I wanted, then they would send them back.

We ran the department in a very hands-on way. I do remember one Christmas saying that, you know, I said in the two weeks to the run-up to Christmas, 'We're going to be buried under a lot of pressure, so we'll clear everything we need to do in those two weeks, but we're not having any more submissions after the 19th December' and actually this was a kind of rather 'heart in my mouth' moment. Still we did that, thanks to my highly efficient private office. Then at about four o'clock in the afternoon on the 19th December, when things were winding down, suddenly, there were about 250 emails with pre-Christmas

submissions and my Principal Private Secretary said ‘I don’t know what we’re going to do’, because as soon as they’ve left the official and they’re in your departmental inbox, it’s your responsibility.’ So, I told my Principal Private Secretary that they were all to be returned and then they went back to the officials and it had a transformational effect on the seriousness with which they took those sort of deadlines after that.

PR: What about the use of special advisers? How were they useful to you?

TJ: I had wonderful special advisers [spads]. Bill Bush, Nick Bent, Sarah Latham, Nigel Warner. Well, both of my first spads were people who knew me very well. The department trusted them to speak as me. Nick Bent and Bill Bush particularly was very experienced, very grown up, very personable, people really liked him, he’d been at Number 10 and he knew more about broadcasting than I did, because he’d been at the BBC. So that, to me, was very, very helpful and he was my exemplary special adviser. Then we got deeper into specialist policy like analogue switch-over, analogue to digital, which we oversaw – and nobody noticed. You know, everyone says the Olympics were a great success, but really the greatest success was switching the whole country from analogue to digital and that’s where you need politics, because the officials way of thinking about it was to say ‘We’re going to have national switch-over day.’ I said ‘That is crazy, because it goes wrong in one place, then the whole thing is a disaster; we just do it quietly over a years (obviously I had moved on by the time it was concluded), region by region’ and like with infrastructure regeneration, you pay disproportionate attention to the people who are most affected and that’s what we did. There wasn’t an elderly person in the country who wasn’t basically visited by teams: ‘Can we switch it on for you? Are you sure that’s where you’d like your box?’ and so on and so forth – and so a combination of attention to detail and a strategic approach which minimised risk was why it worked.

NH: Having been a minister of state yourself, was that helpful preparation for then being secretary of state or do you think you need a different kind of skill set?

TJ: I was a minister of state as we became the new government and that was a very particular time. The Prime Minister was the most popular person in the world, just about, we had a good following wind, people were on our side, would give us the benefit of the doubt and once you are three or four years into a government, all that goodwill is gone. So, yes, I suppose I’m glad I had time to learn, but I think a lot of what I applied throughout government was actually [from] my experience before I went into politics. Which is why I always say to people, you know, young people who want to go into politics, ‘Go and do a job outside and develop that experience’, because I always felt resilient. I never felt I was faced with something that I just couldn’t deal with. I might not know the answer, but I never felt I just can’t deal with this, because I always knew somebody I could talk to and I had the people who would help me outside as well, people that I’d developed a relationship with at the business school, the King’s Fund and so forth and I relied a lot on that.

NH: What was frustrating in government, if anything?

TJ: There are lots of frustrations in government, but there is nothing as frustrating as being out of government! [Laughter] You know, I think, ‘Gosh, I’d love to be doing the Brexit negotiations now’, you know, I’d love to be the minister who is negotiating Brexit and has the power to put in place the stabilising policies that mean that we can have a better outcome from Brexit negotiations than now. The things that you can do very quickly, that have a material change on people’s experience and their perceptions, I believe I do know what and how to do, and it’s so frustrating, I’ll never be able to do it! So, I think I always felt very lucky. I used to get very frustrated with the Chancellor of the Exchequer because he was so difficult, but a lot of the frustrations which are day-to-day, you forget. It’s like childbirth – you forget them once everything has worked well! [laughter]

PR: How would you change Whitehall, from your experience there?

8 Ministers reflect

TJ: If I were Prime Minister, I would absolutely insist that the culture of Number 10 is respectful to departments and to secretaries of state and that Number 10 disavows a culture where it tries to pretend that it's a delivering department. That's the first thing. The second is in critical departments, I would always make sure there is a delivery unit to oversee the delivery plan. I would institute a much more rigorous delivery regime against the priorities in each of the key departments so that you deal very early on with the kind of impulse, which is to do everything. The way I dealt with that was that I used to have a Thursday meeting when I was secretary of state, a departmental meeting every possible Thursday and we had a tracker which would have ten pages and probably 50 policies, because what I knew was, I could really only focus on three things as a priority and probably another seven as kind of second-order priority, but you always have to know what's happening over there that might suddenly erupt and have a junior minister who is focused on that. So a lot would be about culture and a lot would be about the kind of leadership that says 'These are our priorities and we are going to organise Whitehall so that it's competent to deliver these.' I think I'd have much more project-based delivery rather than the stasis that comes from individual departments and it would be resisted, but I think, once you see success, success rewards and reinforces the enthusiasm of that way of working.

I also think that the day of the generic civil servant is over and I would have more specialists. And I think the other thing I would do is to recognise and act on the fact that there's a much greater degree of hybridity in the way policy is delivered now than there was even when I was in government – everything is public, private to some degree. And this is a lesson I learned during the Olympics when the security contract with G4S went, you know, went sour. In fact, it was about this time, four years ago that they said 'We're not going to be able to meet our delivery of 110,000 security staff for the Olympics' and the Olympics was two weeks after that, so the army had to come and it was all fine in the end, but this was a multi million contract and actually, we should have had a team of civil servants embedded in G4S to represent the public interest and I think that kind of interchange, properly managed, is a way that you just extract more value.

PR: Just finally, you worked very closely with us at the Institute for Government last year, on preparation for government. What advice would you give to the preparation for future ministers? The generation after you, hoping to be in government in the future...?

TJ: Well, I think these are sort of wasteland years for Labour at the moment, but I would say to MPs... I would encourage all the best, the largest British companies, small entrepreneurs, not-for-profit NGOs to have parliamentary programmes so that MPs go out and they have experience of working outside Parliament because you can waste so many days if you're only here and I think that's what I would do. So, go and do the parliamentary programme with the police, go and do the parliamentary programme with MI5 or MI6, go and do the parliamentary programme with Rolls Royce or with Boots or whoever and learn more about how business operates, how these big complex organisations operate and then I think that if you do have a chance to become a minister, you'll be much more qualified.

Citations

This archive is an open resource and we encourage you to quote from it. Please ensure that you cite the Institute for Government correctly:

- In publications (e.g. academic articles, research or policy papers) you can footnote or endnote the interview you are quoting from as follows:

Transcript, [Name of Interviewee], [Date of Interview], Ministers Reflect Archive, Institute for Government, Online: [Web Address of Transcript], Accessed: [Download Date].

For example: Transcript, George Young, 21 July 2015, Ministers Reflect Archive, Institute for Government, Online: <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/person/george-young> . Accessed: 15 December 2015

- On social media, please hyperlink to the site: www.instituteforgovernment.co.uk/ministers-reflect You can also use #ministersreflect and mention us @instituteforgov if you are quoting from the archive on Twitter.
- Journalists wishing to quote from the archive are free to do so, but we do ask that you mention the Institute for Government as a source and link to the archive in online articles. Please direct any media enquiries to nicole@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

The Institute for Government is here to act as a catalyst for better government.

The Institute is an independent charity founded in 2008 to help make government more effective.

- We carry out research, look into the big governance challenges of the day and find ways to help government improve, rethink and sometimes see things differently.
- We offer unique insights and advice from experienced people who know what it's like to be inside government both in the UK and overseas.
- We provide inspirational learning and development for senior policy makers.

We do this through seminars, workshops, talks or interesting connections that invigorate and provide fresh ideas.

We are well placed for senior members of all parties and the Civil Service to discuss the challenges of making government work; and to seek and exchange practical insights from the leading thinkers, practitioners, public servants, academics and opinion-formers.

Copies of all the interviews undertaken as part of this project are available at:

www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect

© Institute for Government 2016

2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7747 0400

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

Email: enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk

[@instituteforgov](https://www.instagram.com/instituteforgov)

The Institute is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England No. 6480524
Registered Charity No. 1123926