

Ministers reflect

Alan Johnson



October 2016

Alan Johnson – biographical details

Electoral History

1997-present: Member of Parliament for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle

Parliamentary Career

2010-2011: Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer

May-Oct 2010: Shadow Home Secretary and Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities

2009-2010: Home Secretary

2007-2009: Secretary of State for Health

2006-2007: Secretary of State for Education and Skills

2005-2006: Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

2004-2005: Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

2003-2004: Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education

2001-2003: Minister of State for Employment Relations, Industry and the Regions

1999-2001: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Trade and Industry

Alan Johnson was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Joe Randall on 11th October 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): Let's get started with your coming into DTI [Department of Trade and Industry]. So obviously you'd worked in the unions [Union of Communication Workers] beforehand. How useful was that experience and your prior career?

Alan Johnson (AJ): Yes, it was a very good grounding. The experience of running a Trade Union and being an Assistant Secretary and being involved in negotiations and dealing with individuals' problems, being a sort of shop steward on the shop floor and understanding procedure and all of that: that was very good experience for Parliament, constituency surgeries. And then becoming a minister: I think if you've been a Union official you're used to having a private office, but on a much smaller scale. But of course I was a PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary] before DTI, I was a PPS in the Treasury to Dawn Primarolo who was Paymaster General – and that was a very good grounding. The PPS is nothing really, it was described as the first rung on the political ladder. But Dawn was so meticulous and because she had to do a finance bill every year, she was aware that going into the committee corridor is a completely different world to being on the floor of the House of Commons – it's much more scary, and political careers are ended by ministers thinking 'Oh, it's only a committee corridor, the Civil Service have done all my papers for me, all I have to do is read out what they've written and then swan through it.' Dawn understood that everything she said would be scrutinised by tax lawyers and the avoidance industry and all the rest of it. And that once you're in that committee corridor it's much more forbidding than the Chamber, because it's a smaller place, but it's replicating the opposition in front of you and they can intervene at any time. You have to really know your stuff, you had to really work before you go in there. So, I learnt that from Dawn – a bit of a master, I have to say, in her grasp of detail. I also saw a bit of the preparation for Questions the Treasury team did together. Gordon as Chancellor made it quite collegiate, so PPSs were always involved in that. So I had that little bit of an apprenticeship.

And then, as I described it in my book – available in all local bookshops, £16.99! – I describe coming into the DTI. I had a very young but amazingly wise private secretary in my office, Simon Lancaster, who is now a great speech writer and doing wonderful things, but he was 25 but he explained to me the way private office worked and it has never been explained better since, despite all the other things I went into. His point to me was 'Look, everywhere in this vast Whitehall there are people who you won't know and you'll have to deal with at long distances and it can be a really overawing experience – an awesome experience – but look, we're your private office, we're here for you. We're the bit of the civil service which is just dedicated to you and to do your bidding and if you want me to go and listen to every phone call that is not personal...', so he told me about that, and 'If you want someone to go and make an argument to another senior official in another department' – there was a big problem with silos and still is a big problem - 'Or in DTI, I'll do it, I'm the person to do that. You don't have to worry, we will be looking after you, watching your back and all that.' It was very reassuring and really that is what private office is about. One of my criticisms, actually, is that private office now – it may have always been like this – but it was seen as somewhere you go for a couple of years when you're very junior. It's very hard work so you can't sustain it for long. It's long hours and then you move off elsewhere into the civil service and maybe the private office could be made a bit more attractive for people who are not at the outset of their careers.

NH: Just on that, did you feel in any of your ministerial jobs that you were able to control who was in your private office a bit or say to the perm sec [Permanent Secretary] 'Actually, I'd like this person to stay on a bit longer', those sort of things?

AJ: Yes, on all of that. Three examples: at DTI when I came back as secretary of state I insisted on a woman working part-time being my private secretary, where the advice was that she shouldn't have been

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appointed, to replace the guy who was originally there when I moved in. And, you know, the Civil Service view then – maybe it's changed – was 'Yes, but look she wants Thursdays off because of child care and Thursday is Cabinet day' to which I said, 'Cabinet day – what do I need her there for on Cabinet day?' And also the first ever woman permanent secretary in the DTI also had not just childcare responsibilities, but an elderly parent to look after and that was an appointment I supported, but there was an institutional push back against that. But in the end I got my way.

At the Home Office, the Principal Private Secretary – we didn't get on. I spoke to David Normington [then Permanent Secretary], he was moved. Again, I've heard stories of others [that couldn't do that]. You have to get on with your Principal Private Secretary, you have to have faith and confidence in them. There's all kinds of reasons why that should be damaged, but if it is then it's no good and the minister's not going to be the best minister they can be in those sort of circumstances.

The other one is the way that the civil service facilitated me taking officials with me on this kind of merry-go-round of different ministerial departments I got on, five different Cabinet positions. I took with me my diary secretary from the DTI, my press secretary from the DTI, Simon Lancaster who ended up as my speech writer in the DTI, as well as my spads [special advisers] to these other departments and they facilitated a way to do that, even though their parent department was the old DTI. So I never found any problem, but found the civil service almost falling over backwards to make sure that a minister was comfortable with the team he or she had.

NH: You mentioned there the merry-go-round, you did move around quite a bit, particularly in some of the Cabinet jobs – a lot of them, I think, were for less than a year...

AJ: Seven months in DWP, a year in three departments and two years at Health.

NH: Did that feel like too much?

AJ: Yes, far too much. Ridiculous! It's one of the things that David Cameron got right, he didn't have constant reshuffles. We had far too many. Some were caused by scandals or resignations or whatever, but that can't excuse the regularity, it was almost an annual reshuffle.

NH: And how therefore when you found out you were going to a new department and you got there, how did you figure out the brief and how did you establish what your priorities would be?

AJ: Well, somewhere over there is the day one briefing that they give you at every new department and if anyone's got past page 50, well done! Because you start reading it and suddenly the job's on top of you. Of course it depends how long you've got. Say you're appointed in the summer, so I got that first position as junior minister at the DTI just as summer recess started, so you can take a load of stuff away on holiday for a brief update, but usually you are appointed on a Friday and on your feet in the Commons on the Monday. But they try. So the fact that they give you that brief means they've had a go at it and then very quickly you'll have a meeting with all the senior officials and sit around and get a feeling for things. But I think why it worked OK for me, why there were no real disasters, is because of the people that I mentioned that I took with me: there was an air of familiarity. I had the same diary secretary who knew me backwards and knew the way I did things. A speech writer is very important, press secretary would go into the departmental press office but she was my press secretary. My spads were very good. I don't know how you've found this as you go round, but special advisers can make or break your time as a minister. You've got one set of people who, and this happened to me when I replaced Ruth Kelly [as Education Secretary] at [the Department for] Education – Ruth had done an awful lot in her office with her special advisers and very rarely met the officials, and there was a resentment between the officials and the special advisers. In another department, I heard of someone I replaced that their special

advisers liked to go round the department saying ‘Look, I’m the eyes and ears of my minister’ and expected to be treated with some kind of reverence.

I had particularly good special advisers, because they were good at making relationships very quickly with the Civil Service and special advisers are crucial. I agree with all the Northcote-Trevelyan principles and I wouldn’t change the Civil Service to any great degree, I think we’re very lucky. The Victorians gave us part of that infrastructure of sewers and railways, but they also gave it to us in government – and you mess with that at your peril. But special advisers are new kids on the block and in ‘Yes Minister’ – which some of my colleagues thought was a documentary rather than a comedy – the special advisers are pushed out the way very quickly. Now, I think the Civil Service recognises how important they are, they are written into the Civil Service Code, they see all the papers, but there’s an obligation on them not to believe that that gives them some kind of special arrangement, where they can be pompous and difficult and all that. So mine weren’t; that made the switches between departments pretty painless.

NH: Do you have any examples of how you used your special advisers? So what it was that you were getting from them that you couldn’t get through the traditional civil service machine?

AJ: Any specific examples? One might come to me... But I mean, basically they’re the only people in that office that you’ve appointed. They’re your personal appointments and therefore you’ve got a closeness to them and a faith in them, a confidence in them that is crucial in this cold, harsh world that you’re dealing with. You trust them. So they’re giving you not just the continuity when you’re changing departments, they give you that trust that they will tell you things absolutely straight forwardly – it won’t be coded in the kind of famous civil service language of ‘Oh, that’s very interesting, Minister’, which means ‘Send to the men in white coats’. You would have a discussion with your special adviser before you got to that stage, really, about testing out ideas. And if they knew the people you were going to be dealing with and they knew the departments, then that was their job to be sitting along the parts of the civil service you hadn’t reached yet. They’d give you good advice – I suppose an example is the education deal, when we tried to introduce a clause that made it compulsory for religious schools to take at least 20% of their pupils from other religions and no religion at all. The bill had already gone through the Commons, it had got to the [House of] Lords, there was an amendment by Ken Baker [former Education Secretary], we liked the idea of it, Andrew Adonis was very keen on it – he was a junior minister in Education – we supported it. But my spad said ‘This is not going to work, because when you go back to the Commons, you’ll experience the power of the Catholic church.’ I ignored them and went with the Civil Service view and ministers’ view, Andrew Adonis in particular, and it was described as ‘the fastest U-turn in history’. So from the pulpit on Sunday morning to Members of Parliament, in the North West in particular, having constituents knocking on their door saying ‘What are you trying to do?’ I had to beat a hasty retreat.

So special advisers have that worldly-wise kind of understanding. That’s the other thing of course, civil servants are politically neutral – there must be a political heart beating there somewhere, but they have to kind of suppress it. So they can’t give you political advice in the way that a special adviser can, and they don’t understand – this was a problem with civil servants – they don’t understand your responsibilities as a Member of Parliament. That is outside of their understanding, completely. So, the good civil servants get to know that and I’ve been in private offices where they realise very quickly that Fridays have to be left for constituency work. In fact, at Education there was this wonderful Principal Private Secretary called Mela Watts. She insisted that the whole private office come up to Hull to meet the people who worked for me there, which seems like a pretty straightforward idea, but nobody else ever did it. So yes, it’s understanding that political world and the fact you’ve got two jobs, one as an MP and the other as a minister.

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NH: Yes – in your book it seems like you were still a very active constituency MP, doing stuff with the trawlermen and so on while you were still a minister. Did you ever have trouble balancing the two roles?

AJ: No, I didn't. But in the book I talk about Nick Brown, the Chief Whip. I wasn't going to accept the invitation of being PPS because I feared not being able to talk on the floor in the House. Not being able to raise questions, not being able to enter debates at all, not being able to have adjournment debates would damage my ability to see this big campaign for the trawlermen's compensation through. And Nick said to me in a patient way, as if he was dealing with a complete idiot, but said it very slowly, 'Alan, look, where's the money going to come from for the trawlermen?' – 'The Treasury' – 'Where will you be as a PPS?' – 'Oh, the Treasury!' So, you know, the point there is... And he would know about this as the chief whip, because the chief whip of course can't do anything on the floor of the House. So if you think a MP's job is really to raise issues on behalf of their constituents, the chief whip, the speaker [of the House of Commons], anyone in the Whip's office, etc [can't do that], but the compensation is you get a better chance to get in front of ministers to make your case. You get better access to them behind the scenes, so you can do your job as an MP as well.

NH: Can we talk about the different ministerial roles – I suppose a lot of your colleagues came straight into secretary of state jobs in '97, whereas you went through the ministerial ranks a bit. What was the big difference between being a PUSS [Parliamentary Under Secretary of State] then to a minister of state, then to secretary of state?

AJ: Well, I did think it was a good grounding and I did light-heartedly pull Tony Blair's leg about this, saying 'The problem with you is you've never done any job other than the Prime Minister!' And actually there was something to that, he didn't know how it all worked beneath him and Tony made that very insightful point that you're at your most popular when you can do the least, because you're inexperienced and you're at your least popular when you've been there ten years and you understand the system and how it works. I think he'd have understood it better if he'd taken a Ken Clarke route – well, Ken Clarke didn't make Prime Minister, maybe that's why. You see how it all works better. I mean, Chris Mullin [Labour politician] has done a view of a junior minister's life as being pretty depressing and you're just there to make up the numbers. The late Malcolm Wicks [Labour politician] did a brilliant – he knew he was going to die – did a brilliant piece in, I think, the Civil Service Quarterly Magazine, about how he disagreed with his old friend Chris Mullin and felt that any kind of minister, if they wanted to, could make a difference.

I give that example in the book about something I wanted to do as a junior minister and eventually persuaded Number 10, Number 11 and of course my Secretary of State to do. That's the difference, you have to persuade the secretary of state. The secretary of state doesn't have to particularly persuade their own ministers, but a junior minister would have to. The civil service is not a problem there, the civil service will be very helpful, they want the minister that takes decisions. The one thing that's important, or a tip to ministers, is 'Don't be indecisive!' Don't think that you can stick those things back in the red box and eventually they will go away. It's no good waiting for a week's time, because you'll have another whole set of problems come up that you have to make a decision on. And the civil service want you to be decisive. They want to give you the arguments for and against, but once you've decided, they will follow. I only had to give them a direction once, which is to over-rule advice, I only did it once. Generally, they'll come with you and it's like driving a dual control car. If the minister sits there and doesn't do anything, they'll put it in gear and drive it away, because government has to work. So I think that experience of seeing all that and seeing what it's like below the secretary of state level is important. Probably valuable in any kind of existence, but particularly in politics.

NH: And just one final one on this before we move on to more of the day-to-day – how did you make your, particularly as secretary of state, how did you make your ministerial

teams work and, you know, moving around a lot you had new teams to get to know pretty quickly?

AJ: Yeah, but you know them as Members of Parliament. You've been Members of Parliament together and you go back... So at Health, Dawn Primarolo rocked up as my Public Health Minister, I'd been her PPS. It's very rare that you don't know anything about those ministers, or you don't have a fairly good relationship with them and most often a very good relationship with them. The traditional weekly meetings are important, you've got to give ministers and junior ministers the time to listen to their views on things and to make them feel the very important people they are in the machine. So Ben Bradshaw was my Health Minister when I was at [the Department of] Health, he's excellent. When you had the ministerial meeting you had half an hour with the civil service there and half an hour with the civil servants withdrawn, to talk politically. I never had a problem with the ministerial team. Of course, a lot of what you're doing is what was in their manifesto that they were elected on as an MP anyway. I mean, there's that aspect to it, that's the strand that runs through your ministerial life. And some of it is what the Prime Minister has handed down from above, that you all have to get on with and some of it is the irritation sometimes of prime ministers who are desperate to have something to say at the party conference. They'll contact you two weeks before, 'Oh, we must have this', but you're all as frustrated together about that, so there's no disagreement within the ministerial team.

NH: And in Health as well, you obviously had Ara Darzi [Surgeon and then Lords minister] who'd come in from outside as a real sort of specialist expert in his area. That must have been quite different from other ministerial teams you'd worked on with MPs who were much more generalist?

AJ: Yeah and it could have been an absolute disaster! I was lucky, these were called the 'Goats' – the Government of all the talents, if you remember – and I got probably the two best ones, Ara Darzi at Health and then Alan West [Royal Navy officer and PUS for Security] at the Home Office. It could have been a total absolute disaster, if Ara had been a different personality for a start. He came in with the patronage of the Prime Minister – it was Gordon Brown's idea to bring him into government and do this healthcare review. So – and this may be a shock to you – but surgeons are not noted for their humility, but Ara's personality made it work. The fact that the triumvirate at Health, which is a curious department because you had three equal people there, you had the Chief Executive of the NHS, the Permanent Secretary and the Chief Medical Officer [CMO] – and the Chief Medical Officer's changed a bit now – but then they were all of equal rank, there was no first amongst equals. And it meant you could have three different empires, although they worked very well together and David Nicholson [as Chief Executive], Hugh Taylor [as Permanent Secretary], Liam [Donaldson] as CMO. I heard stories of other 'Goats' getting it wrong, but Ara did it entirely the right way. I think Alan West did as well.

Joe Randall (JR): So my question was going to be about the kind of day-to-day reality of being a minister. Firstly thinking about that time in the secretary of state role, how was most of your time spent?

AJ: Most of my time. Well, let's start at the end. The red boxes came in the evening and that took a lot of time, most of the time. Are you talking about in Parliament, out of Parliament?

JR: So looking across – maybe instead of day-to-day, week-to-week is better, because it divides that way. So what was the proportion of time you were spending on departmental, parliamentary, those different bits of your life?

AJ: I would say the majority of time would have been in the department. Unless you count red boxes as in your department, dealing with the day-to-day stuff that comes through government. There wasn't the same tendency for the speaker to grant Urgent Questions then, it was very difficult to get an Urgent Question [UQ] granted. So you weren't constantly thinking 'Oh, I better stay around, because I might get

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a UQ.’ So you only went to Parliament for questions once a month and for set pieces, second readings. And then all the slog on the committee corridor, if it was legislation then of course it was junior ministers doing it, third reading and the report stage was generally junior ministers. So I didn’t spend too much time in Parliament, though there was always a bill to take through. The majority was in the office, dealing with the day-to-day issues that occur in the department.

JR: Yes and of those day-to-day issues, how much of your energy as a minister was internal, facing the department, and how much of it was thinking about the public side?

AJ: Most of it was internal. And one of the problems with us, I suppose, is that the civil service is very much focused on getting the legislation through, not delivering afterwards and that’s a common criticism and I think that’s probably true. But there were lots of occasions – so for instance, I can think of legal highs at the Home Office which were just starting, a poor girl died as a result of it and seeing her parents. Victims of knife crime, that kind of stuff. You saw a lot of members of the public and there was always the need to go out into the country and to visit hospitals in the case of the NHS, police stations and other places in the Home Office. So you had a bit of that as well. But it was always something that was quite ritual in that you would put into your diary a few days a month when you were out of the office, it wasn’t something that cropped up which you had to do at the last minute. The day-to-day grind was in the department.

JR: And in terms of balancing, you mentioned bringing your diary manager with you, but I suppose for other ministers coming into government, what would be your main piece of advice for them on how to deal with the competing demands that you have as a minister in a busy department?

AJ: I think the main piece of advice to them would be to ensure that their private office is functional, functioning properly and they take some time to talk to their private office and understand what everyone’s responsibilities are and what they need to do. I’d do that before reading the briefing that you’re given. If you’re a Secretary of State, well even if you’re a junior minister, you’ve got someone in that department that deals with everyone else in this huge empire. So get to know them and get to understand more about what your function is in that department, what the hot issues are, what their take is, not by reading dry documentation but by listening, talking to them, and obviously to the Permanent Secretary who will generally have a much better overview. Make sure they understand very early on what your commitments are as a constituency MP and tell them. You know, when you’ve got something you have to do in the constituency and it’s not on a Friday, tell them ‘Look, you better understand, next Tuesday I’m meant to be here’ and they’ll facilitate that if at all possible. And also perhaps your family arrangements they may need to understand as well, because they’ll want to help you do this job and it is 24/7 – a way of life more than a job. So do those things as well. But people approach it in different ways, I’d be very loath to rewrite Gerald Kaufman’s book. In fact I did read his ‘How to be a Minister’, I mean it was very useful, but it was depending on Gerald’s experience. He had Ron Dearing as a senior civil servant and took a lot of advice from him. So if you can find somebody in the department who you can trust and like – and hopefully that will be your Private Secretary – that will help.

JR: I suppose one of the big demands that faces you as a minister is when unexpected things crop up, external events or when crisis hit, so we were wondering if you could talk us through an occasion from any of your ministerial jobs when that kind of thing occurred and talk us through how you went about dealing with that?

AJ: Stafford. I mean, a Healthcare Commission report was coming out that identified what was happening at Stafford. The first bit you have to look at is how this is going to be managed in the news and there’s always the interview with John Humphrys on the Today Programme the next day. You need as much information as possible. So you’re talking about last minute things and this came out the blue.

You make sure you get the press lines right, this is where your communication spads are very important and those press lines are not spin, those are as factual as you can be and as honest as you can be. I mean, at Stafford, a receptionist with no medical training was being triage nurse – it was just appalling and amazing. So: get the department together, get all the senior people together, how do we resolve this, what do we do at Stafford now in the short term to put this right. At Health that involves people trying to persuade you that the Chief Executive and the Chair should stay in the NHS, just be moved. This is the incredible part of the Civil Service, they don't sack anyone, either in their world or in associated worlds, they always believe in moving them on somewhere else, which is really weird. So amazingly, at Stafford I had to argue vociferously that these people should go, not just be moved, go. We had to send an expert in – there were lots of medical tsars in those days who were clinicians themselves – to look at the safety of the hospital now, what needs to be done to improve it straight away, to meet the relatives of people who'd died who they were convinced had been killed by the NHS... There was an awful lot of speculation around about unexpected deaths. In the end there was only one that was for clinical purposes and that was a misdiagnosis but you have to set up an arrangement for the families to have a process by which, in Stafford's case, they could have medical notes. It was the only way you could do this – looked at by a neutral doctor from somewhere completely outside Stafford to see if it contributed towards their loved ones demise. And you have to face up to what's going on, when you're going to get hit by your opposite number in Parliament with the suggestion that every hospital in the country is a Stafford, which is ludicrous.

JR: How useful did you find the Civil Service in those crisis moments?

AJ: They were fine. I'm trying to be super critical, but I didn't find any problem with the Civil Service in dealing with those. What I found from other departments, the way not to do it if you like, is to try and duck out, to try and blame some junior minister or try to pass it up to the Prime Minister or pass it along to someone else, maybe your predecessor or whatever – you've got to deal with it, you better understand that it's your problem and you're the one who's going to be expected to resolve it.

I think in the Home Office there was one a week... It used to be escaped prisoners but that's MoJ [Ministry of Justice] now. We had terrorist attacks – the guy known as the underpants bomber on Christmas day. Because he had been educated somewhere in the UK I think, there was a feeling he'd been radicalised here, but more than that there was a feeling that because he'd got through all the security systems at the airports by putting semtex in his underpants that there would be people all over the world now copying this – so there was a real sense of crisis over that Christmas. So that involved the Department of Transport as well, what do we need to do at airports to stop this? You can't screen every single individual, strip search everyone before they get put onto a plane. But the Civil Service are pretty good at this. Number one, they don't panic. Number two, you might end up with a pandemic... The pandemic – when it broke out everyone thought this was the pandemic, one comes along every 40 years, the first one killed more people than the First World War when it broke out in America in 1915. And I had all these useful advisers telling me how 1915 it started off in America and it reached the eskimos in the North Pole so quickly, and you have to make the decisions, you know, do you have to keep kids away from school or whatever? It turned out it wasn't what we thought it was going to be but the way government swings into action, particularly now when they're used to it after Northern Ireland, and 9/11 and 7/7 – I was a minister when that happened – because you've got the forums to get all the experts in and to deal with it and perhaps that wasn't the case in the past. I think we are much better at doing that now. So I wouldn't have any particular advice to offer as a way to do it differently or any particular criticism of the way the Civil Service deals with it.

JR: OK, moving away from the catalogue of crises then. What achievement in office are you most proud of from your time as a minister?

AJ: In office, children in care were very important. Didn't solve the problem, but I think kids in care were put in care too easily, moved around too much and kicked out when they were 16. So we changed

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the law to say that a school cannot reject a child in care. Because when they got moved around they went to the school that had the most available places. It was very difficult to get the Civil Service focused on this by the way, had to really work on this. This was one area where we found it was quite resistant. So we changed the law to say that schools had to accept them and we changed the law to have a virtual head teacher that was responsible for all children in care in their area, so they always had someone to go to. Changed the law to say they can't be kicked out before the age of 18 and with a desire to raise that to 21, which this government has done, to their credit. It's still depressing statistics on children in care, but we thought that was important. Raising the educational leaving age to 18 was, because it was my idea and I got buy-in from Number 10 and Number 11 and we've been trying to do that since 1945, the Butler report envisaged that.

In Health, not a big one but a very important one, was this barbaric system where someone needed a drug that wasn't available on the NHS and that somehow they had the resources to pay for it, all their NHS care was withdrawn. It was usually cancer drugs. And I mean, Andrew Lansley was my opposite number, didn't raise it. A newspaper raised this and Lansley was very sniffy about doing anything about it and people told me the whole of the NHS would come tumbling down. But I got clinicians to look at this, Mike Bridges advised me how to do it, we changed the law, no one noticed, it wasn't a big catastrophe and now people do not have their NHS care withdrawn at such a vulnerable time in their lives. The Darzi Review was very good, worked very well, I put that into action – I'm very proud of that.

JR: So on children in care you said that it was tough to get the Civil Service to focus on it. How did you do that? How did you go about doing that? Who helped you?

AJ: Well Beverley Hughes was the Children's Minister and she was a very formidable minister and we kind of wouldn't take no for an answer. The problem was, I think, with that set of officials, that they came up with stuff that wasn't going to change anything. They came up with cosmetic stuff. Whereas what we needed was something that was a fundamental change to what we did at the time. And maybe they were trying to protect themselves from criticisms, they may have been involved in previous reviews that hadn't solved it, so they were going to try and justify it – I don't know. But we really had to put our foot down and send stuff back and say 'That is just not good enough: we're not going to put that into a white paper, it doesn't change the situation, we want something groundbreaking.' And they'd have gone away and sworn at us, about us and probably complained about it, but in the end they came up with something that was widely appreciated and respected.

There was no resistance to raising the education leaving age, but a feeling of how do you make it work, how do you make it compulsory for a 17-year-old to go to college when they didn't want to? A lot of those discussions. Good consultation usually gets you round some of that. And always, in the end, the Civil Service will work with you to deliver what you want. Children in care was a case in point. We might have battled hard to get the right white paper, but then they were very supportive.

JR: So that's some of those specific bits about the civil service in particular, I wonder what your reflections are on, more broadly, what you found most frustrating about being a minister? So that can be kind of how government as a whole can be made to be more effective?

AJ: Well, it's this thing about siloes – we always talk about it, but it never works very well. It's very difficult to work across government departments.

JR: Do you have any examples of where that did work?

AJ: Yeah, I've got a great example about where it works perfectly and it's called a bill team. So when you're taking legislation through the House, you get this bill team put together and very often other departments are involved in a bill. I can think of an example of a DTI bill that had a knock-on effect with

the DWP [Department for Work and Pensions], so you'd have an expert come in from there. But the bill team was this array of talents all put together for one particular task, to get the bill through. There's a comradery there, there's an expertise there, people enjoy working together in that way and it is, as I say, usually cross-departmental because there's hardly a bill that doesn't have ramifications in other areas. So, it's not just the skill of the parliamentary draftsman to look at the amendments and decide whether they can be written into law, deal with your last minute amendments which ministers often have. It's the team around that. I always thought if you could get a bill, if you could get the Civil Service to work together as successfully as a bill team, then you'd have cracked a lot of problems we face.

The converse to that is, me and Lord Sainsbury used to, when we were at the DTI, think about 'Wouldn't it be good if you could get together that kind of team to get rid of legislation as well as introducing it?' There's far too much legislation cluttering up the statute books. It's not as big an issue as it was in 2003/2004, we even had a Cabinet Minister for it deregulation, John Hutton. And the other thing is about delivery – do you go that step past getting the legislation through, to getting the thing actually in place and delivered effectively?

JR: And then I suppose the other bit about your experience of a minister and how government works as a whole was that you, primarily working in some of the big delivery departments – I suppose the DTI is a bit different, but criminal justice, Health, DWP – how did you work with the centre of government and how do you feel that relationship worked?

AJ: Well, once again it depends on the people involved. So there was a Number 10 spad in every department you went to and they would come and talk to you on behalf of the Prime Minister and some of them were better than others. I took the view that if it was a disagreement or if they were telling me that the Prime Minister wasn't happy with something, then the Prime Minister had to tell me that himself. There's an example of this when I was at Education, we had responsibility for adoption agencies and we were introducing equality legislation about same sex couples being able to adopt and there was a big row, it comes back to the Catholic Church again. Catholic adoption agencies were refusing to comply with this and were very upset about it. And I had not just the special adviser from Number 10, but also a minister coming to tell me 'You can't push this through, the Prime Minister is against it, a lot of your Cabinet colleagues are against it.' I talked to Cabinet colleagues and didn't find anyone against it and in the end, when I spoke to the Prime Minister, he said 'I've never been against that!' Now, you know, maybe Tony changed his mind or he was being disingenuous, but there was another time when we had a green paper ready to be published, when I was at Health, and I was told that Gordon Brown disagreed with it. We'd been through all the processes, but Gordon had seen it and didn't like one aspect of it, I can't remember what. My Permanent Secretary came to me and said 'This is all ready to go, you've briefed out' and all that, I said 'Well, tell whoever you're talking to' – and it would have been his equivalent in Number 10 – 'That if that's the way Gordon feels, if he doesn't ring me himself to tell me that then this is going to be published.' No one rang me. So very often just like those bad special advisers I was talking about, you know, who swan around as if they're the minister and say things on behalf of the minister that are nothing to do with your views – that happens to prime ministers as well.

NH: Looking outside of Whitehall and government, how did you work with outside groups? I guess having worked in the union you'd had the experience of lobbying from the other side, so how did you engage with outsiders? In Health you were talking about patient groups, the BMA [British Medical Association], people like that – were they useful in the policy process?

AJ: Yes. And I did engage with them and I did recognise how important they were to me doing my job properly. So the disability lobby at DWP, I had several occasions where they were chaining themselves to the railings. They were feared by civil servants and we were introducing a change to what was incapacity benefit. So the Disability Living Allowance was our idea in 2004, it didn't come through until god knows

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when, but you know, instead of focussing on what disabled people can't do, why don't we focus on what they can do? Instead of disability, it should be about what they are able to do. I mean, David Blunkett, born blind and told he'd be a brail typist or a piano tuner, he ended up as Home Secretary! This was very much the spirit of the age and the disability lobby were in on that completely, completely. So when people, speaking on behalf of disability lobby, said this is unfair to disabled people that you suddenly have this system where you interview them to see whether they are capable for work... I mean, it changed in over ten years, but originally we had people breaking down our door who'd been on incapacity benefit, because they'd left the shipyards and the coal mines and were pushed there to keep the unemployment statistics down, who wanted to get back into work with a bit of help and a bit of therapy. And so you keep the disability lobby on the side and in that instance, it worked very well.

I introduced tuition fees, for my sins, as Higher Education Minister and found then that actually various student bodies, once they understood you pay nothing until you graduated and you've got to be earning more than, then £15,000, and incidentally in response to that half the money goes to poor kids as maintenance grants and half of it goes to making universities better and expanding them, you can bring them on board. You might actually get people whose minds are never going to be changed, because they're very dramatic about things and you might be wrong, and they might be right on some of the stuff. But generally if you're convinced of the logic of your argument you can at least get some understanding. And you can get some feedback from them on things that might change, that don't destroy the policy of the minister but make it much more acceptable.

NH: OK. So last couple of questions, if we move on towards the end of your period as a minister. This is where your book ends almost, when you become Home Secretary, did it feel very different being a minister when you knew there was an election coming and you knew that Labour might not win this time? How did that affect your day-to-day life as a minister?

AJ: Not really, no. It just meant that there were things that you knew you had to embark on, that you couldn't. So, for instance, we knew in the Home Office that terrorist groups were finding ways around our ability to monitor them, because the technology was changing and there were areas of the internet and other things that were coming forward that were safe spaces for them that we couldn't track. And that was worrying everyone, but we just didn't have enough time to get the legislation through and to do the necessary preparation for it. So that was always a priority after the general election. So things like that. You get a bit of a 'hurry up' to get stuff implemented and finished, identity cards being a case in point. I mean, I've still got mine, people were merrily buying them for £15, because we thought you might get a certain volume in there that was going to be very difficult for the government to just tear up the legislation, but they found it very easy to tear up the legislation! Things like that, but generally the day-to-day stuff that you have to do, particularly in the Home Office, on counter terrorism, crime and immigration... We'd got the points-based immigration system in and it was beginning to work. We never got this e-Borders thing, so this idea that you'd know when someone was coming here before they stepped on a plane and you'd know when their visa had expired, because it had all been computerised under this e-Borders thing – never managed to get that into place in time. But no, I don't think there's any sort of examples where you thought, apart from the timing, that we won't do this until after the election. There probably were some things that had been unpopular in other departments, not in the Home Office... If I had saved identity cards until after the election it probably would have been better served!

NH: Looking back over the whole period, '97 to 2010, did you observe any changes in the way government was running, the way government operated over that period?

AJ: Because of the change between Tony and Gordon, it's difficult. Gordon came in with a very different style and very much more driven – and I wouldn't say that's a bad thing – and then we had the financial meltdown to contend with as well, so I don't think I can look at it in that sense over 13 years. Probably

with special advisers it was in that period where they became accepted, it was in that period where the Civil Service Code actually mentioned them and it said that all submissions should go to special advisers. And I guess before then there was a battle in every department whether a spad should see this stuff or not. Even then Gordon came in with this thing about 'spadflation', we all had to reduce the number of special advisers. David Cameron did the same, spadflation, yeah. And so I lost one, actually, went down from four to three because of that and I thought that was the wrong approach. Tony had seen the value of special advisers and Gordon saw it as something that if he publicly reduced the number, he would get lots of applause. It didn't really happen.

NH: And between Tony and Gordon, the style of government felt different as well as some of the policy direction?

AJ: Yeah the style of government was different, but once Tony had gone we didn't have to worry about the TB-GBs, which had been a terrible barrier to good government because on everything, Number 10 and Number 11 took different views – from tuition fees to pension reform to incapacity benefit, there was a difference between the two and you had to tread a line. Sometimes you're on TB's side of the argument, sometimes you're on GB's side of the argument. The fact they never worked together was bloody difficult. The one thing with Gordon taking over as prime minister is that all disappeared, so you didn't have to think about the two of them, just about getting the Prime Minister on board.

NH: And final question, so after that trip down memory lane, what would be the main pieces of advice you would give to a new minister today?

AJ: It would have to be meaningful advice, otherwise it looks like it's patronising. It would have to be a meaningful piece of advice, something that they wouldn't know for themselves. They know their life's going to change, they know they're going to have to do two jobs, they know that they're not going to have the same ability to raise things on the floor of the House and all the rest of it, they know all that. They kind of know what to expect I think.

I think one piece of advice I'd give them is: remember, the Civil Service is there to help you, it's your friend, whatever prejudices you might have built up, because you never worked with the Civil Service – give them a fair chance. I actually think we are well served by our civil service and lots of countries across the world would love to have the quality that we've got in our civil service. So don't go in there immediately thinking you're going to have to battle to get your way because you're not. Don't go in there immediately thinking that your Permanent Secretary is going to think of you as the temporary secretary and you've got to assert your authority, you haven't got to do any of that. I never came across any of them, but there might be some strange individuals who think like that, but don't go in there thinking that this is going to be anything other than very fulfilling and very worthwhile.

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