

Ministers reflect

George Freeman



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George Freeman – biographical details

Electoral History

2010-present: Member of Parliament for Mid Norfolk

Parliamentary Career

2014-2016: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department of Health)

George Freeman was interviewed by Nicola Hughes on 30th November 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): Could you talk us through your route into being a minister, because it was slightly different to lots of more generalist MPs that come into a given ministerial role. You were a bit of an expert in your field and then I think had the role more or less created specifically for you?

George Freeman (GF): Yes, it was an unusual route. I was the first person to hold the position of Minister for Life Sciences. As a result of the post-Brexit reshuffle and the Prime Minister having to create a whole series of new ministerial positions to handle and deliver Brexit, that role has been removed and four ministers are now doing the bits of the role that David Cameron had assimilated into one when creating the role in 2014.

It started actually back in 2010/11. The then PM, the Chancellor and I were working together in that early year of the Coalition on – as well as deficit reduction and austerity and getting the public finances under control – on what was going to be the Coalition's and the Conservative leadership's strategy and narrative on growth and the 'economy for tomorrow'. I'd suggested that a much deeper commitment to life science could be fundamental, both as a key growth industry but also because the big agenda in life science was better integration with the NHS. That would drive NHS productivity and the better adoption and uptake of technologies, which was the big complaint from industry and also the big need for the NHS. So we conceived our first industrial strategy in life sciences which would really achieve two key goals: give the industry the great thing that it needed, which was deeper research integration with the UK medical research and health service sectors; and help the health service have the one thing it most needs, which is much quicker and cheaper access to innovation to help drive its plans for 21st Century transformation.

In 2010 the Prime Minister asked me if I would take on a new role as Government Adviser on life sciences. So I was involved with Number 10, the launch speech of the first Industrial Strategy for life science and shaping the strategy during that year. We launched it in December '11. A year later, we launched the genomics programme. Two years later it was very clear that the implementation of that strategy was impeded by Whitehall departmentalism, lack of integration between DH [Department of Health] and BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills] and that as a radical strategy it needed a Ministerial leader to drive it through and to communicate it. So David Cameron asked me in the reshuffle of 2014 to take on that role. In fact, at that time he said 'I should have done this two years ago, because we haven't achieved as much progress as I would have liked to have done.'

NH: So what for you then were the key differences between being an adviser and a minister? What was it you could do as a minister that you couldn't do in the adviser role?

GF: Fascinating. So as the Prime Minister's adviser – or Prime Ministerially appointed Government Adviser – working with David Willetts [then Minister for Universities and Science], I thought that I would have some influence. What was fascinating was that I had a lot of influence in Number 10 and 11, and with ministers, but as a non-minister I was effectively invisible to the Civil Service. I used to go to meetings and Whitehall civil servants – because I wasn't a minister – literally looked through me, didn't feel it necessary to include me on papers. It was very strange! So that's the first thing. The system is really only set up to handle two types of people: ministers and officials.

Secondly, in the end, the implementation of the measures that we had set out required resources to be allocated in a different way. They required policy decisions to be set differently and traditional silos and ways of working to be challenged, both inside departments and between departments. It was very clear

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that it is impossible to do that without ministerial and political leadership. What became very clear to me as a junior Minister implementing what was actually a huge (£18 billion) cross-departmental Strategy, strongly backed by the Prime Minister and Chancellor, is that you also need very strong political buy-in from your Secretaries of State and you need key Whitehall officials in your host department and in Treasury, Number 10 and other key departments to be aware of the political priority the programme is being given from Number 10 and 11.

NH: So how did you go about getting people on side and bought into that vision?

GF: Well, fortunately in the life science sector there was already – and still is – a very well developed leadership group of very influential senior officials who I had worked very closely with in putting together the strategy: the Government Chief Scientific Officer, the Chief Medical Officer Sally Davies, some of the senior civil servants at DH, Jeremy Heywood [Cabinet Secretary] and John Kingman [Second Permanent Secretary] at the Treasury. There were a group of us who had worked very closely on the original strategy under David Cameron and on genomics, and that really helped. But equally, it creates a challenge because channels of communication become at the very highest level established between Number 10, Number 11 and senior heads of bits of either Whitehall or arms-length bodies – almost above the traditional channels of policymaking and departmental administration. So part of the challenge that the role illustrated is that you need patronage from Number 10 and 11 to make things happen. But you also need to embed the management of a portfolio, policymaking and resource allocation in the usual channels of the sector or department.

NH: And added to that, it is interesting because you were split between two departments.

GF: Yes. There were a handful of us under David Cameron. It was a model he backed to tackle the “departmentalism” of the Whitehall silos and champion issues which ran across different departments.

NH: How did you find it? Did it work?

GF: Well, it was completely essential for this strategy. Personally, I think that modern governments, if we are going to tackle the scale of the structural deficit and the productivity challenge, are going to have to do much more cross-departmental, issue-based leadership. I would go as far as to say there are two types of ministerial functions. This is a simplification, but to some extent civil servants in departments think of ministers as the political pressure valve for their entire organisational existence. So if you ask a department ‘Why do you need a minister?’, their first few answers would be ‘To answer parliamentary questions, to go to the dispatch box, to explain and justify the money that we spend doing all the things that we’re put here to do.’ So the day-to-day business of government – emptying the bins, building the roads – requires functional ministers who deliver those core, timeless functions of the departmental state.

That’s quite different in many ways from ministers who are driving reforms across departments for a prime minister, a chancellor, a government leadership team – driving key priorities that don’t naturally fit in one department. That’s what the role I had was and I think it is essential. I think we will end up – or more governments will end up – needing to tackle that problem. I don’t think we are well set up for it, yet, if I am honest. That was illustrated no better than in the Comprehensive Spending Review [CSR] of 2016. A year after this new post of integrated Minister for Life Sciences, linking the portfolio of BIS and DH, is created, everybody went into their silos for a traditional comprehensive spending review. It was weirdly dysfunctional: my BIS officials said they couldn’t show me BIS CSR documents, because I was also a minister in the Department of Health. And vice-versa. During that time HMT, DH and NHS England agreed a major £4.2bn Digital Health Investment Programme. Although I was a Minister for Digital Health, I wasn’t party to, or even sighted on, those discussions until the CSR was completed! That’s how tribal the CSR turf war and territorialism on funding is and it makes it almost impossible to

do the job, because the truth is that central to the strategy was the more efficient allocation of resource in pursuit of a national policy strategy set by the PM.

As an aside, because David Cameron had never been a minister before, I suspect that he and his team couldn't imagine that that's how their ministers were being asked to work. When you have been a junior minister through a CSR then I think you see just how siloed and territorial Whitehall really is. So the CSR is the obvious example. In the end, ministers talk and Sajid Javid [then Business Secretary] and Jeremy Hunt [Health Secretary] and I were able to come to some important agreements about priorities. But the official process of the CSR was not conducive to joined-up departmental thinking.

NH: No. That's really interesting. I suppose silos in government is one of the perennial problems and there have been various attempts through the years on cross-cutting teams and targets and things like that. How would you do it better? As you said, would you appoint ministers or cross-departmental teams? Can you envisage a better way of doing it?

GF: Yes. I don't pretend to have all the answers. But I think this is quite a deep structural, cultural, organisational challenge for modern government and that's why I think the work you're doing is really important.

Whitehall and government is really all about power and influence, formal and informal. There are one or two well-established routes for the dissemination of power and influence. One is patronage. Political patronage is highly vertical; it uses traditional power structures. So, as a prime minister is appointing secretaries of state and building ministerial teams it's really important that the priorities are properly cascaded down. One of the things that was obvious in the life science role was that David Cameron and George Osborne had created the role. I arrived at the Department of Health just at the time when DH and its ministers were beginning to prepare for the pre-election battle, which in 2014/15 was very focussed on the NHS, in which the life science strategy around integrating business and health, health and wealth, wasn't within the inevitable political priorities of the Department of Health. And Jeremy Hunt, in my view, did a brilliant job of trying to depoliticise the question of NHS sustainability and counter the weaponising of day-to-day politics in the dispatch box. But the introduction of a big new business portfolio into DH not before the election was potentially quite problematic.

Secondly, in Whitehall it's really all about the money. So you can publish a Strategy and have Prime Ministerial patronage and everyone knows this is supposed to happen, but in the end you've got to have the budgetary control. And weirdly, whilst I had responsibility in the Department of Health for about £17 billion – the drugs budget, genomics, data, digital health, the National Institute for Health Research – in BIS, where the Research expenditure, Office for Life Science, Innovate UK, and regional and sectoral grant funding was based, I wasn't responsible for one penny.

NH: Right, interesting!

GF: So the Medical Research Council (£16bn a year), Innovate UK, the Biomedical Catalyst Fund, the initiatives that I had helped to launch through the Life Science Strategy, no one in Number 10 ever thought to put budgetary reports into the new portfolio. That makes it quite hard to drive an integrated strategy because inevitably – particularly in a period of constrained public finances – Departments jealously guard their own portfolios and budgets.

Ultimately, I think this speaks to a deeper problem at the heart of government which we're grappling with, which is the model of annual or triennial comprehensive spending allocations: we basically fund in silos. And if you deliver "more for less" in government, we typically give you less. If you deliver less and need more, we typically give you more. For somebody coming in from business, it is no wonder that we struggle to get productivity up in the public sector. Ultimately I think through this crisis of political

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economy of structural deficits, we need to move to a situation where we run spending on business plans against strategic objectives, rather than simply giving money to the same people we have always given it to. If you had a business plan for the life sciences sector, it would be one document with BIS and DH people all bound by it, in which the individual allocations represent the investment with a net present value delineation of all of the things that are supposed to happen. And then everybody is incentivised by sharing the proceeds. Now, that would go a long way to tackling the problems that I have identified. Ultimately I think that incentivised based model of integration and alignment of outcomes is the elephant in the room both in Whitehall, and locally.

NH: So, as you mentioned, you have been in business, in the biotech world, how useful was that prior expertise? And how did the departments react to having someone who was an expert in the area?

GF: It's invaluable. Firstly, because I wouldn't have been able to help frame the increasingly specific Life Science Industrial Strategy – which has received international plaudits and strong support from the people immersed in the sector – without having been in it. But the fast-growing, fast-moving, fleet-of-foot business world isn't necessarily the best training ground for dealing with the juggernaut politics of Whitehall! I think part of my value to the Prime Minister has been that in the life sciences, which we and other governments had identified as a key sector for the UK, it's moving very, very fast and technology and commercial pressures are transforming the business models. The danger is that well-intended governments of any party who decide to intervene aren't closely enough connected to the industry to know what really needs to be done and end up relying on the wrong people to tell them. That's typically either people who are not busy enough in the sector, who have got the time to wander the corridors of government, or the old companies who have a historic franchise over communication with government. A lot of the most exciting small players and innovators just don't have that sophisticated conduit and conversation with Government.

But also government ends up being very guided by the people that it gives money to. So you tend to get a lock-in of traditional interests that guide the analysis. I think the prime minister found my fresh perspective and insight from coming out of a 15-year career in the sector, just at the time when the government was wondering what to do, very helpful. I think this links to a broader point that far too often people get elected to Parliament, join the party of their choice, end up in government and far too seldom do people look and think 'What do they really know about it?' I think quite often officials have been quite surprised in meetings I've had where I get MPs to just give a 30-second summary of what they did in the 15 years before they came to Parliament. There's a lot of expertise there it would be sensible of us to draw on.

NH: What about the role of being a minister itself? Did you know what it would entail or was there anything that surprised you about how the system worked?

GF: Well, firstly, there's no training, no guidebook, no manual, no induction! You leave the Cabinet room with promotion ringing in your ears, cross the road and walk straight into the department and start doing the job. Now, in some ways of course the whole of your career has been a preparation for that moment, but it is quite a weird way to run an organisation. Of course, it is immediately obvious that it suits quite a lot of people to keep it like that. I'm quite struck as we look at the transition period in America, President Elects have two or three months to have discussions and assemble a new administration and they will go through approved hearings – it's a very different approach. I have often wondered after a general election whether it wouldn't be better if the clutch plates of Government and Parliament wait two months before they engage, for new officials to get to know ministers, set the priorities, have some away-days, go through the policy history and the heritage and what was in the manifesto, and the realities of the challenges facing government, and then bring the programme to parliamentary accountability. Meanwhile Parliament could take some time to think about who would be

good to chair committees and all that. I have often thought the system and the process would work better with a small summer “interlude” like that.

As we discussed my portfolio was slightly unusual because I crossed the road with a very strong package of reforms, very strong Prime Ministerial and Treasury support for driving them, and a very clear mission. But when I arrived as a minister I went into a department that had only just created a directorate to oversee this agenda. One of the things that was very evident and striking was the way in which a new portfolio like that doesn't have the traditional official and unofficial backchannels of communications and influence within Whitehall. So whereas in an established role like, say, the Roads Minister, the private office of the Roads Minister has a collective memory about previous commitments, previous conversations, discussions with the Treasury and so on, for the Minister for Life Sciences everything we were creating from scratch. For months after the creation of the post, we would be contacting other departments who didn't even know there was a Minister for Life Sciences (!), which adds another level of complexity to making the mission work.

There's another observation I'd share: It was clear to me and to the PM that we had to positively embrace a proactive communications strategy around explaining the thinking behind the creation of this role, for a number of reasons. Firstly, we wanted to make sure it was impossible to misrepresent this in any way as anything that could be misconstrued as some form of creeping privatisation. That a deeper partnership between the research industry and the NHS was really about making sure that NHS patients could get quicker access to innovation and the NHS could get innovation more cheaply, in return for speed and a deeper research partnership. Secondly, we needed to communicate to industry that this was part of our Industrial Strategy commitment and that a deeper relationship between BIS and support for the research sector and the great procurement engine of the Department of Health and NHS was fundamental in what we were doing. But we also needed to communicate in Parliament and to charities what we were doing and why this was significant, and to international investors. I think I gave 160 speeches in 17 months. It was immediately apparent to me that despite the best speechwriting efforts of the Department of Health, this was a new agenda that had come from outside. So I only read one speech prepared by officials! All the others I wrote and assembled myself, normally in the preceding 12 hours. It took me a long time to realise that that actually inadvertently contributed to a problem. Because in traditional Whitehall departments the process of writing the minister's speech is actually a process of setting policy, legitimising policy and funding decisions and if you bypass that, as I had to, you also bypass one of the most powerful channels for communicating what a minister actually is thinking, saying, wanting in the department. It took me just over a year to realise that. And then I started transcribing my speeches and sending them back to my department so they could see what I was actually saying.

NH: So that was the main way you communicated to them what it is was that you were trying to do?

GF: Well, it was one of them. It was born out of a realisation that being the minister at the apex of a pyramid in Whitehall doesn't necessarily mean that everybody down in the pyramid gets to understand what the mission is. I remember thinking as I crossed the road, 'I wonder if we should have one or a series of away-days to really communicate what this new ministerial vision is all about and share it', which is what I would have done in the private sector. But I was quickly told that is not how Whitehall works. I think that was a mistake. I think it would have been powerful and helped drive shared leadership of the mission.

NH: Indeed. You mentioned doing lots of speeches. How did you actually spend your time as a minister – what would a typical week look like for you?

GF: Well, in the first phase we had to introduce the new portfolio to a lot of stakeholders, those people who needed to know what we were doing. So there was a huge number of meetings with not just all the

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different bits of the portfolio who wanted to know what the mission was of their new minister, but also some really important external organisations who we wanted to understand what we were doing. That was a conscious decision, but it takes up a huge amount of time. In the end it pays dividends, because when we came to then introduce a series of what might otherwise have been quite challenging and controversial reforms, the pitch had been rolled and people did understand and supported it. But it takes up a huge amount of time.

We decided quickly not to have two private offices – one in each department – but one that moved between the two. I spoke to other ministers and they said ‘Don’t have one that moves.’ And because the main political challenge and policy challenge was in DH, I was based really more in the Department of Health and “went over” to BIS. Incidentally, that was a problem after the election, a year later in the CSR, where I was then well established in the Department of Health, but didn’t have such strong links and civil service support networks inside BIS, which was reflected in the Comprehensive Spending Review.

I was very struck that whilst we might have a minister between two departments, we didn’t have a proper forum for real engagement of director and director general-level civil servants. There is an Office of Life Sciences which in the reform that created my ministry became a formal unit of DH and BIS, but to be honest it always felt to everyone like a BIS unit that had a hot desk in DH, rather than a fundamental part of the DNA of the Department of Health. Thirdly, of course DH had recently just put the entire NHS administration of it on an arms-length, semi-autonomous basis, a reform that I think is absolutely right. But I don’t think I’m shedding any state secrets to say that has profoundly changed and challenged the way the DH and the NHS leadership interact. I think that’s an ongoing process and a lot of my reforms required support funding, prioritisation from NHS England which had to be mediated and negotiated through a very, very difficult and much bigger political discussion between government and NHS England through the CSR – and in circumstances where the only real format for that was meetings around the Secretary of State’s table in the Department of Health, with enormous agendas covering 101 other issues. So the main implementation body for much of the policy that the PM had put me in post to deliver had just been outsourced to an organisation we no longer controlled!

NH: Yes - quite a few of the health ministers we’ve seen have told us that one of the difficulties is finding the levers of change in the NHS and it being such a big complex organisation you can’t just announce a policy change and stuff happens. How did you try and go about affecting change in an organisation like that?

GF: Well, in three ways. Firstly by making it very clear at the beginning that this strategy – the life science strategy – and this ministry was not about simply pushing and articulating industry’s demands onto our health system. I fundamentally repositioned the mission and captured it and framed it in one key sentence right at the beginning and shared that with NHS England and held a launch conference with them at top table in which I made very clear that the mission was to promote the uptake and access of the health service to new innovations at prices they could afford, in a way to help them tackle the big challenges they set out in their five year forward view. And to do all of that in a way that made the UK a more attractive place to do the research. So it is very important to have that sort of commitment covenanted at the highest level.

Secondly, the personal relationship with Simon Stevens [then Chief Executive of NHS England] and with key members of his team. Bear in mind, he at the same time was trying to set up a management structure for NHS England, which is no mean undertaking either. Thirdly, in the end, it’s all about the money. And so probably the most effective mechanism I had for getting NHS England buy-in and commitment was with the support of the then Chancellor in a series of very clearly specified funding announcements that drove the agenda forwards in genomics, digital health and a whole series of other measures. Of course that reinforces part of the problem, I think, in Whitehall which is that the influence

has become spending, and that is a deep problem. If you ran a company on the basis that what matters is what money is spent on, you'd probably go bust.

NH: It's an interesting way of looking at it - a lot of people say a key to policy success is having the Treasury on board, but as you say there are wider risks attached to that.

GF: That is true, and I am not in any way undermining the importance of funding, but there's something quite dysfunctional about the way that almost all of Whitehall and its connected agencies work on the recognition inherent in the allocation of money from the Treasury. Of course, that's important but it has become everything. Therefore, lobbying for money has become the most effective way of preserving a whole myriad of personal and organisational influence and power structures. But that feeds ever higher expenditure, not necessarily efficiency and the sort of reforms that modern government requires.

NH: Looking back, what are you proudest of? Do you think you got some way towards achieving the vision and the strategy that you set out at the start?

GF: Without a doubt. People in the sector will tell you, and been kind enough to have said and have written to me and others, to say that in the last few years the framing of that strategy, the commitment to it, and then the creation of a ministry to oversee it has played a really important part in sending a signal around the world that the UK is not resting on its laurels as a 20th century old fashioned academic, old fashioned but nonetheless high-quality research base, but we're gripping the fundamental issues at the heart of 21st century life science – which is genomics, data, clinical integration of research with patients in hospitals and that we have a strategy for it, a deep strategy to which we are deeply committed. We're gripping the difficult issues in a way which has helped consolidate our otherwise weakening reliance on 20th century research and industry footprint.

Very interestingly, that has been probably recognised more internationally than it has here. I have been invited to speak all around the world; I did two trips to the White House in the last year, because their people are really interested in what we're doing in this space. So yes, I think we definitely made huge progress and advances. Despite the frustrations I have shared, I think in Whitehall there is a recognition that this really matters and has to be got right. In fact as part of Theresa May's Government's commitment to make sure that the absence of a dedicated minister for life science doesn't slow down progress, we're now putting in place a very substantial inter-ministerial Life Science leadership structure, which will bring all the parties together, across different departments, to make sure that unity of purpose is maintained. So it's a different model of achieving the same thing. When I look back on what we have done: our interest in, and championing of, a more integrated healthcare innovation economy harnessing genomics, infomatics, wireless health, remote diagnostics, precision medicine and more effective change through the Accelerated Access Review - that technological transformation of healthcare, I think, is one of the most important things we're doing. It was a huge honour and I think we certainly haven't finished it. But we have made huge strides in accelerating everybody's understanding of the opportunity.

NH: You've mentioned a couple of frustrations already, including silos. It is interesting now in your new role as chair of the PM's policy board, is there anything else you would do to try and make government as a whole more effective?

GF: Yes. We've talked a bit about tackling the dysfunctional funding mechanisms. But I think ultimately if we're going to really unlock the sort of approaches required to tackle the structural deficit and build an economy that works for everyone and tackle the productivity crisis, I think we're going to have to quite boldly embrace integration of services, incentive-based reward mechanisms in the way we allocate funding. And as night follows day, that will mean the localisation as well. You can't do that at the sort of scale that Whitehall does things.

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Our traditional model is very vertical separation of the functions of government cascaded down, top-down from Whitehall down to localities – but in functional silos. I think we're living through the painful, tectonic reallocation of that model to, say in healthcare, the integration of primary, secondary and community healthcare funding streams in a locality where people actually live and work and experience disease. I think the key is incentives. If we incentivise a locality, for example incentivise the health and care leaders in that geography, to reduce hospitalisation and invest better in prevention and public health and all the things we know we need to do, that brings the behaviours that we want to see. If we continue to fund hospitals and GPs on turnover, we shouldn't be surprised that all the activities we have built into that system reward higher turnover. So if we build in incentives for reducing turnover in hospital and treating smarter, treating earlier, diagnosing earlier, preventing acute disease, I'm very confident that our inspired staff and leaders in the health and care system would respond. I think that localisation and integration is inevitable and sits right at the heart of the broader policy challenge that we face in health and care, but I would also say in economic development, regeneration and infrastructure. Similarly, I support the Heseltine vision of integrating those budgets into a Single Regeneration Budget. Instead of fragmenting and dividing the local effort with a million and one announcements of funds that might make the person announcing it in London feel good but actually doesn't support an integrated response on the ground, you pool the resources and suspend it and withhold it until a joined-up vision locally is produced and then you release all the funding in accordance with this jointly agreed business plan. I think that model is inevitable.

NH: Is Whitehall ready for that cultural shift?

GF: Probably not. But I think the level of the public finance challenge that we face – the Chancellor set it out again very clearly last week in the Autumn Statement – the structural deficit, that bit of debt and deficit that grows even as the economy is growing, I think that is already clear to me and I think will rapidly become clear to more and more people, profoundly challenging of the old fashioned model of resource allocation. I think the race is on to recognise and reform that.

NH: You were a minister I suppose in quite a difficult time because you had an election in 2015 and the move from Coalition to single-party government and in the last year you also had the referendum and the run-up to Brexit. How much did those two events affect your work as a minister?

GF: Oh, hugely! I was created the UK's first Minister for Life Sciences in July 2014, just on the eve of the summer recess. September is a bit of a non-month really in Whitehall, so we had October then three months before what became a pre-election lock-down period, effectively. In January, February, March increasingly little could be decided or announced. Then we have the election. Then we return in June '15 for a couple of months before the summer recess and the Comprehensive Spending Review. Then we have three or four months before what became the EU referendum lock-down. So effectively, I had about six or seven months of what I call 'runway time' and we got a lot done in that time. But inevitably you're shaped by the big events, and of course the big events have a lead-in period where the whole machine is focused around the inevitable political necessity of preparation and management.

NH: Final question is, what would be your advice to a new minister? Based on your own experience, but also maybe looking around at other ministers you've worked with, what would your advice be to them on how to be effective in office?

GF: Well, firstly I think to take the time at the beginning to make sure that the Prime Minister, your secretary of state and other ministers that you have to work with understand the agenda, mission that you have been given by the prime minister. And similarly with officials, to think about the officials and the departments and the officials who lead them who are going to be involved in the delivery of your programme and taking the time and trouble when you're first appointed to go and see them or invite them in. If you're wondering about whether it's a good idea to have an away-day – it is! And I would take

your director generals and your directors to it, make the time, find the funding, insist on it if you've got a set of reforms that you're implementing, so that everybody understands the mission.

Secondly, in the end, the way the system works is officials administer according to their own minister's expressed or implicit political priorities. And as a minister your most effective mechanism for getting your agenda driven is to make sure that ministers in the relevant departments understand and support it and make sure their officials understand it. British civil servants are phenomenally loyal to their ministers, not to you. If their ministers say it's a priority then it is more likely to happen, then if you let them know it is a priority for you. I suppose obviously enough, a third piece of advice would be to be very strategic and pick two or three things that you can do and focus on them and prioritise. Whitehall works on clear priorities and making sure you have two or three and everyone understands what they are is part of the job of being a minister.

NH: Brilliant. Is there anything you wished I had asked or anything you would like to add?

GF: I was very struck by the relationship between a minister and the private office. It became clear to me after a while – never having worked in Whitehall – that the private office viewed their role principally as the gatekeeper to the ministerial sign-off, authorisation and decision for the rest of the Whitehall machine. Essentially, the private office saw their role as making sure that they got things that needed signing off, deciding on, into the relevant box for the minister. For the minister, the private office is also the only bit of the machinery which is not just allowed but actually supposed to be their transmission mechanism for their vision, mission and reform across the whole of Whitehall. It is supposed to be a two-way interface. And I think private offices are under much more pressure from the machine to get what the machine needs and wants to have signed off in front of ministers more than to think about 'What does my minister want to get done across Whitehall and how do we help them do it?' That was only my experience and might have been because the role was new. I was very lucky and I had some fabulous people in the private office - this isn't a comment on them, but on the structural relationship. It felt to me when I got up in the morning like my private office was not 'my' private office. It was the Civil Service's private office for setting my priorities, rather than for transmitting those priorities out across the system. That might link to the point I made earlier about the difference between traditional functional departmental ministers and reform agents, ministers driving pan-government reform missions. I think they are slightly different roles and they probably require a different type of private office support as well.

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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:

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