

# Ministers reflect

John Whittingdale



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## John Whittingdale – biographical details

### Electoral History

2010 – present: Member of Parliament for Maldon

1997 – 2010: Member of Parliament for Maldon and East Chelmsford

1992 – 1997: Member for South Colchester and Maldon

### Parliamentary Career

2015-2016: Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

2005-2015: Chairman, Culture, Media and Sport select Committee

2004 – 2005: Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

2003 – 2004: Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

2002 – 2003 Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

2001 – 2002: Shadow Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

1998 – 1999: Shadow Spokesperson (Treasury)

1997 – 1998: Opposition Whip

*John Whittingdale was interviewed by Gavin Freeguard and Nicola Hughes on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.*

**Nicola Hughes (NH): Let's start with when you became Secretary of State, and you had two major bits of experience that I'd be interested to hear about and how they were as background and preparation for becoming Secretary of State. So first of all, you'd been a special adviser and been in and around government?**

**John Whittingdale (JW):** I'd had background experience in almost every aspect of the government without actually having been a minister. I started off as a special adviser back in the '80s in the Department of Trade and Industry. I then went to Downing Street and had three years as Political Secretary. Those were days when the roles of special advisers and the political secretary were very different to today. In Downing Street, I was really the only political appointee apart from the PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary]. I worked very closely with the private office, you know, the private office was a team of which I was a part, I happened to be paid by a political party rather than the taxpayer, but apart from that we were as one. It was very different to today. I was elected in '92, I had a short spell on the Health Select Committee, I was briefly a PPS. Then I became a Whip, front-bench spokesman and then Shadow Secretary of State for DCMS [Department of Culture, Media and Sport], that was back in 2003/4.

Then of course, I became Chairman of the DCMS select committee. And that, above all, in terms of preparing for becoming Secretary of State of the department which I had been scrutinising for 10 years, was absolutely invaluable. My Permanent Secretary Sue Owen, for whom I had a very high regard, greeted me on my appointment and said, 'Well, I told all the officials just to tear up the briefing for incoming ministers because you know it better than they do!' It was a great help because I'd done the job for 10 years, and the way select committees work is that you focus on one area and then you move to another area, so during that time I'd done inquiries into gambling, into licensing, into tourism, into heritage, into museums, arts funding, masses on press regulation, creative industries. I mean there was barely an area of the department which we hadn't had an inquiry into. Inquiries are big, in-depth studies that call in evidence, so I felt very, very familiar with almost every policy area. The only area which I didn't know as well was the bits which were coming into the department - when I came in they moved the Digital Economy Unit into the department and we then acquired data protection a little after that. Because they had not previously been under the department, the select committee hadn't looked at them, so I didn't know those areas as well. But in the main, I was very familiar with the policy work.

But I had never worked as a minister, I'd gone straight from the back benches into the Cabinet. When Peter Riddell [then IfG Director] came to see me when I was appointed, and I said to him, 'Can you think of another example of somebody who's gone from the back benches straight into the Cabinet, outside of a change of government?' Obviously on a change of government it happens a lot, but outside of that he couldn't. I'm pretty certain I'm the only person to go from chairing a select committee straight into government. In the other direction, there's quite a few people who've left government and joined the select committees, but to go from scrutinising a government department to running a government department gave me great advantages. I think it's probably the only case.

It was unusual in that, firstly, I had long given up my ambition to be a minister because I thought the time had passed. I never expected it. Also, I mean jokes are made, you know, 'Dangerous precedent putting somebody in who knows about the subject!' and to some extent, that is a reflection on the political reality that when you are appointed - and I've sat in on meetings with prime ministers making appointments - knowledge of the brief is a very long way down the list of criteria. Yet in my case, it was the main criteria.

You know, David Cameron called me in, he said 'The biggest task facing the department is the renewing the charter of the BBC, you've just completed an 18-month inquiry into it, you know more about it than anybody else, so you'd better do it!' So I was specifically given the task because I had that experience and it was enormously helpful. Every policy meeting, I generally did know more than the officials because they'd not been in that particular brief for more than a year or two, whereas I'd been looking at it, in one way or another, for 10 years.

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I didn't know about how government functioned because in select committees you see the permanent secretary but that's it; very seldom do you see anybody at a lower level. I had remembered when I first became chairman of the select committee in 2005, I went to see Gerald Kaufman who had been my predecessor. Gerald said to me, 'Well I haven't got many tips, but the only thing I'll tell you is that DCMS has the worst civil servants in Whitehall.' It might have been true then because DCMS was a very sort of low, small department; I don't know whether it was true, but I wouldn't necessarily dispute it because I wasn't around. But by the time I got there, which was 10 years later, things had changed a lot. Actually the officials were really, really good. I was hugely impressed by the quality of the staff and, you know, the sort of enthusiasm, the dedication, the loyalty; they were fantastic. When I arrived, the first thing on the desk was the general requirement which had been put round all government departments saying 'Model 20 and 40% spending cuts.' So there was a sort of air of utter gloom and the staff morale survey came out very badly. We were then lucky in that actually we were spared the axe by the Chancellor and we didn't have a cut, we had a freeze which was, you know, compared to the 20 or 40% cut was a fantastic outcome. So everybody cheered up a bit then. Morale actually recovered dramatically, we went from almost bottom of the league table to close to the top which was something that the Permanent Secretary was very proud of. But generally, I found the department to be extremely good.

**NH: Loads of really interesting stuff in that and we'll come back to lots of this. You were saying that you knew the subject very well but you didn't know different layers of the department and how government worked so well. Was there anything big that had changed since you were a special adviser in the 80s, apart from what you were saying about Number 10?**

**JW:** Yes, quite a lot. One of the things which had completely changed was special advisers. Again, when I was special adviser in DTI, I was the only one. I was there to supply a political viewpoint to the Secretary of State but I was not there to instruct. The transformation in the standing and authority of special advisers has been dramatic. When I arrived, I knew that it was useful to have them but I wasn't quite sure what particular roles they had and I soon discovered that what has developed, which certainly didn't operate when I was one 20 years before, is this network and the way in which an awful lot is done through the special adviser network. So if you want to get agreement from another government department or you want to sound out the view of another government department you can do it through private office but it's a very formal procedure, you know, 'My secretary of state has asked whether your secretary of state...' etc, etc. Whereas when you do it through special advisers, it's much more informal, they all work together, they know each other and they'll ring each other and the Civil Service recognise that. So a lot of the time the Civil Service would say, you know, 'Shall we get the spads to talk to each other and see if we can sort it out that way?' and that was very helpful. It also was very helpful in terms of communication with the Treasury and Number 10.

**NH: And how did you get your head round how government works, was it just a question of, you know, experience and doing it?**

**JW:** Well, you know, parts of it I knew a lot about and parts of it I didn't: the internal workings of a department, I just had to sort of learn that. I was lucky in that I had an extremely good Permanent Secretary and an extremely good Principal Private Secretary. The Principal Private Secretary, where you don't know something, his job is to help and he was very good at that. We went on a walk-around and then you learn the faces. All the ranks had changed. Years ago when I was in my 20s, you had principals, assistant secretaries, under-secretaries, deputy secretaries and permanent secretaries, all of which have long gone, and then we went to Grade-whatevers and now we get directors and director generals which I'd never heard of before until I arrived! So just working out the hierarchy was a bit of an education and, you know, who I would have dealings with on a regular basis. There was one policy area, the obvious one, which was the BBC Charter where I knew the whole team and I had meetings every week with the whole team, and they were the best because the perm sec had put her best people into that, because she knew it was the biggest challenge facing us.

The one thing about government which, again as an external observer, I saw was the way in which I think the Blair government changed so much in terms of the politicisation of Whitehall and the central control. You know, I worked for a prime minister who certainly was pretty strong and didn't hesitate to tell people what to do, but Number 10 didn't have the absolute grip on everything that it has today and, when I was appointed, it became clear very quickly that big decisions were taken by the Prime Minister

and the Chancellor. I would go and there would be a meeting with the three of us and that was where it was decided. That was the case certainly with the BBC, where I would go along and the Prime Minister, understandably, took the view that at the end of the day he wanted to get an outcome which the BBC would say was a good one for them because that would make it much easier. So there would be about half a dozen issues where I and the BBC were arguing and in each case I'd go and I'd talk to George and the Prime Minister and they would say either 'We agree with you, yeah, tell them that's going to happen' or they'd say, 'Look, you know it's not worth the fight, I don't think we should push that.' So, yeah, there are some things I didn't get but in each case it was always those decisions were taken by those two, with a special adviser and the policy unit person present, generally.

**NH: Back to the select committee, a couple of things on that. First of all, you mentioned that knowing all the policy area was generally very helpful. Were there any areas where it was almost a hindrance or where doing things in government was different to how you might have approached them from an outsider, scrutiny point of view?**

**JW:** I don't think so. As a sort of observer of policy, obviously we had produced reports which in some areas had been highly critical of government policy. I had a slightly surreal experience in that I had to sign off, I think, three responses to select committee reports in which I'd authored the report! So I was responding to my own report and in some cases we did not go along with the recommendations: more bizarre! Though nothing too significant. Most of the time I said 'This is an absolutely brilliant report!' And then, of course, I found myself appearing before the select committee a few times. In actual fact, most of the faces had changed, not all - Paul Farrelly who'd been on throughout my time as chairman of the committee was still on it, I mean he's been on for it must be 15 years now, he had some fun. I mean, the disadvantage, of course, is that if you have been active in an area of policy, particularly in a fairly high-profile position, you are on the record on everything. So I could often find that my words were quoted back at me, particularly when it was something I had called for the government to do and the government didn't do, and the government would continue not to do and therefore I would be having to explain why we couldn't do something that I had called for. That's a sort of challenge which people who move from opposition spokesman to minister have to confront everyday, so it wasn't unique.

**NH: That reports story reminds me of what Damian Green told us when interviewed him, he was a joint minister in two departments, and had to write to himself telling himself not to do something! Just bizarre. The other thing on select committees, I mean obviously in your 10 years in that role you'd seen different ministers come and go and give evidence...**

**JW:** I had five secretaries of state.

**NH: Five?**

**JW:** In fact, it may have been more... I can tell you... I had Tessa Jowell, James Purnell, Andy Burnham, Ben Bradshaw so that's four Labour, Jeremy Hunt, Maria Miller, Sajid Javid; seven.

**NH: And what did you perceive, from speaking to them all from the other side of the table, what did you perceive made an effective secretary of state?**

**JW:** I mean command of the brief essentially, particularly when appearing before a select committee. Sajid is a very competent minister but he came before us quite early and he did fine but, you know, there were a couple of rocky patches where he just simply didn't know the answers. I think we were questioning him about Leveson Two [the press regulation inquiry], and I don't think he was even aware there was an issue about Leveson Two: either it hadn't been in his brief or he hadn't got that far. Being a secretary of state appearing before us on that committee, you are there for two hours usually and you are examined in detail on every single policy within your brief and that is very tough.

When I found myself on the receiving end, actually I was fine, but my officials went into overdrive. They kept putting huge expanses of time in my diary for select committee briefing, hours and hours and I said, 'I don't need this, you know, I've been doing this for years!' and I took it all out the diary and I hardly did any prep, but I rested on 10 years of knowledge of the brief. So that, again, is an area where the experience was just hugely helpful. It's gratifying having chaired a select committee for 10 years, but they're regarded with great trepidation. I mean my perm sec would go into depression for a week before

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having to appear because it's not something that they ever normally have to do, and the idea of public cross examination from a potentially hostile inquisitor is quite a frightening prospect.

**Gavin Freeguard (GF): So thinking about the day-to-day reality of being secretary of state, how did you actually spend your time? What would a typical day look like?**

**JW:** I used to battle continuously to try and create space. They all thought that they had to fill every hour of the day and if there was a space, it was a challenge to think of something to put in it. They were not good at understanding that you're still a constituency MP and that still creates a workload. Now, I had had a policy, for 20 years as an MP, that every letter that went out from my office I would at least look at, and normally sign and approve. I had to give it up. For the first time, I had to accept there would be things going out from my office which I would be completely unaware of, you know, just normal casework and policy questions because obviously I was bound by government policy and there was the central Parliamentary Resources Unit supplying lines on whatever the big campaigns of the day are and my office would just use those. I'd still do my surgeries, but there would be a large proportion of constituency work which I was no longer able to do. I mean, there was no alternative. I was quite sad and a bit guilty that I was not giving it the attention which I always had done, but you just can't do it. Even when I said to the private office, 'Look, you know, I've got to have an hour or two a day to try and deal with constituency work,' that was still only dealing with the stuff where the office felt that they were not able to do it without consulting me, so that would be a small proportion.

In terms of the day, I mean literally I would get the diary and it would say 11 o'clock this, 12 o'clock that, but I had never, until becoming a minister, allowed anybody control over my diary. Previously, I had always said 'If anybody wants to see me or arrange a lunch, come to me and I'll do it' because I didn't like the idea of not having control of my life but, again, there was no point in even trying to suggest that. You had a full time diary secretary whose only job it was to juggle the diary. She was very good, but, you know, I felt that the way I had operated as an MP, as a select committee member for 20 years I just couldn't do anymore, simply because of the demand. And that was...you know, yes I knew the policy, what I had never anticipated was the relentless pressure in terms of the constant workload and meetings and balancing the policy discussions in the department, the meetings with the various sectors for which we were responsible, because everybody wants always to come in, have a meeting. Then there was the international work and I was quite interested in the international work, so, you know, if the Tourism Minister of Singapore puts in a request, I always would say yes, I'd have a constant flow of ministers from around the world coming through the department. Then, of course, there would be getting out of the department and we would look to have at least once a month a day out of London. We'd go and visit museums or galleries or whatever. There would be overseas trips: I did Mexico, I did China, I did New York, each one of those is quite time consuming and very busy. Then there is the political pressure because if you're a Conservative Member of Parliament, you have to keep your association happy and you have to raise money. The way in which you do that is by getting people to come and give speeches and, of course, what do they want? They want cabinet ministers and there aren't that many cabinet ministers. So I was getting a lot of requests to go and do things for colleagues all over the country. Then there's just the box and signing things off. So you put all those things together and there was no time left, it is very wearing. That was the aspect I had never anticipated, simply the volume and the relentless nature of it.

**GF: What was your strategy for dealing with the box, out of interest, was it a late night or an early morning sort of thing?**

**JW:** It used to cause huge amusement to the office because I used to read the papers and briefs for meetings that day in the bath, so I would hand them back to the team at private office, occasionally they were a bit damp! This caused great entertainment in private office that they would get back these slightly sodden sheets of paper. So it was half and half, you know, I would usually do reading for the meetings of the day in the morning. I started off very dutifully, sort of half-past 11 at night going through it all, and I came to the conclusion after a bit that this wasn't entirely sensible and that I'd try and fit it in during the day and I'd do a bit, 15 minutes before or between meetings.

The area where I think the workload prevents you operating as you should do is your responsibility as a member of the government outside your department. You know, write-rounds are the best example. Write-rounds are happening all the time: the department will tell you if there's a departmental interest

and then you will be advised to put in something saying, ‘I think this is a marvellous idea, but on this particular small point I have this reservation...’ What the department didn’t ever take into account is that I might have views, which are not necessarily connected to the department, about policy. Most of the time you don’t see the write-rounds unless there is a departmental interest. I did once say to them, ‘I think I’d quite like to see them,’ and it was a horrifying revelation. Suddenly there’s enormous pile and actually I knew I wasn’t going to be able to do it! So I had, to some extent, to put up with this, and you rely on your special advisers, they have to understand what it is that I’m likely to want to say something on, they know your views up to a point. Michael Gove and I had a similar attitude to a lot of things, particularly in terms of things like civil liberties and so his special advisers would tip mine off, you know, ‘Michael sent this round, get John to have a look because Michael, I think, would appreciate some support.’ Because it wasn’t a departmental issue, we would have no actual interest departmentally in that area, it would not have occurred to them that I might actually want to say something. So it would be a question of being alerted to it and then getting, usually through a special adviser, an input into it. I haven’t talked to Michael in detail but Michael, I think, is the only minister who actually insisted on seeing everything that went round even though it went outside his department. I felt guilty that I didn’t, that was an area where I wasn’t doing as much, I was so consumed with DCMS stuff that the ability to look at what another 15 departments were doing was almost impossible.

**NH: As an aside, did that apply to your interventions in Cabinet meetings as well? Did you feel you were only representing departmental interest at those?**

**JW:** Well, I mean you get a brief and there was a marvellous brief I had from the department which said something like ‘prospects for the world economy’ and it then just said ‘We have no interest in this!’ [laughter] You know, the department had no particular observation from its own point of view! You got clear steers: on each heading, there would be a departmental line to take, which I would never use unless there was a very strong reason for doing so. Then, of course, I would chip in with my own views because you’re sitting there listening to a discussion. It wasn’t as if I had lots of time to input or read or prepare, but if you’re sitting around the cabinet having a discussion you chip in. Obviously the thing which the department shied away from any mention of was Brexit. I, as a supporter of Brexit, would pitch in alongside Iain Duncan Smith and Chris Grayling or others, when discussion came round to matters European and the department would just accept that that was going to be something I would do, that they wouldn’t get involved in.

**GF: Just going back to the point you made earlier about fighting to create that space and the relentless nature of the job, have you got any practical tips that you would give to any incoming secretary of state of how to deal with that?**

**JW:** I mean I think you need to lay down rules right from the start and, in a sense, create more space than you need because it fills up, it will always be under pressure and there will always be things that eat into it and so you need that flexibility. I think if you don’t establish that from the start it’s very difficult to get back, so you need to have a very strong word with your diary secretary right at the beginning and just work out how much time you are happy to give the department and then say, ‘Right: these hours you will have control, put in the meetings that we need, but I’ve got to keep these other hours free.’

**GF: On a very different subject, I wondered if you could talk us through an occasion where maybe there was an unexpected event or crisis that affected the department and how you ended up dealing with it?**

**JW:** Well, there would be events which came out of nowhere which we had some departmental responsibility for. Something like the TalkTalk cyber-attack: we had departmental responsibility for cyber security so you suddenly get this call to say that there’s been a massive data breach affecting at that stage we didn’t know how many people. I had to chair COBRA [emergency committee] on that which was an interesting experience. I went a few times, but that was the only occasion I chaired it. That was an area of policy I wasn’t that familiar with because it was relatively new for the department and also the machinery of all the security apparatus was something I hadn’t had a lot of dealings with. So I was quite reliant on the officials in sort of talking me through it. But it wasn’t difficult and actually, although you were required to take decisions, they were fairly easy decisions.

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Then there would be breaking news stories. Very early on, I think literally within 10 days of my getting appointed, there were the FIFA arrests in Switzerland and I got summoned to the floor to answer questions on that. I'd done an inquiry into FIFA corruption, so I knew it pretty well. The Urgent Question was always looming and if one was granted - and the speaker has a habit of granting them - then, you know, everything was torn up.

### **GF: How did you and your ministerial team work on things like Urgent Questions as opposed to perhaps the whole machine?**

**JW:** Generally, I had a policy of doing them. An Urgent Question is only going to be granted if it's quite an important issue, and I took the view that generally I should do it. There were one or two where either I wasn't there or it wasn't something which I was very familiar with. Ed Vaizey was my immediate minister for digital matters and he did some of that but, in the main, I did it and ministers would turn out. Then, of course, we had the Lords' ministers. I had four junior ministers, two in the Lords and two in the Commons and I had a very collegiate approach: we would have ministerial meetings once a week and they would be quite relaxed because we all got on with each other, that's just the way I've always worked, we tried to make them fun. So I think I had reasonably good relationships. I had, on the one hand, Ed Vaizey who had been there for five years already when I arrived and then Tracey Crouch was my request, because she had worked with me on the select committee, she had always said to me, 'There's only really one job in government I ever want to do and that's be Minister for Sport.' I arrived and there was a vacancy for Minister of Sport, the outgoing minister was a woman, so I knew Number 10 would be quite keen to fill it with a woman and it was so obvious that she was the right candidate, so I put a word in to Number 10 and she got it. We got on very well together.

### **GF: Which achievements in office are you most proud of?**

**JW:** I suppose in terms of my legacy, the thing which has my name written on it is the BBC Charter which was an incredibly painful process in that there was massive lobbying and 'Save the BBC' campaigns, you know, fighting a threat which simply didn't exist. But despite my numerous attempts to tell people that I had no intention of dismantling the BBC, there was this perception and we had this sort of propaganda war going on. Then I had my own personal relationship with Tony Hall [the Director General of the BBC] and we would meet: we had the exchanges in the newspaper columns or briefings in the press, we then had the formal negotiation where the BBC team would meet my officials, and then about once a month Tony and I would go out to dinner together, just the two of us, and that was very helpful. We actually reached an outcome which, you know, didn't deliver everything I wanted but it delivered a lot of what I wanted and which he also was able to say he thought was a good outcome. I think that the Charter does represent really quite important changes to the way in which the BBC operates and, you know, it is my charter. So I'm happy to be remembered for that.

I suppose for the arts lobby, what matters to the arts lobby is funding and I was very lucky because George [Osborne] liked art so we were always treated quite well in the budgets and the spending rounds. Having been told that they might face these huge cuts I had the job of ringing up the directors of the National Gallery and so on and saying, 'I can now tell you that actually you're just going to get a freeze this year.' They were all so ecstatic. I mean it wasn't really my achievement, it was much more that George decided not to do it, but the department felt much happier.

We had one or two other things which were my own sort of areas of interest. I'd always taken a close interest in media polices as well as the BBC, I looked at a whole range of different media policies, some are still ongoing like Channel 4, like the terms of trade between internet and production companies and TV companies. We had a series of reviews.

Then, of course, there was the ongoing saga of press regulation which continues, still, to be very controversial. I felt strongly that the ultimate sanction which is contained in the legislation, which was that newspapers that are not part of a recognised regulator are liable for costs, win or lose, the campaigners that wanted that I don't think had realised that under the legislation, although it was passed by Parliament, to come into effect it required the Secretary of State to sign an order. I was very clear I wasn't going to sign it. I announced to the press that I was minded not to sign it and they were absolutely furious, because I don't think they'd even realised that I could stop it. That's currently under debate today, it's still very live. But I just felt it was the wrong thing to do and so I held off from doing it

and that, again, is something which I would defend and say that I was proud to have done because I just think it would have been incredibly damaging.

I mean, the great thing about being a secretary of state is you can suddenly get something drawn to your attention and you can say, 'Wow, you know, that's really interesting, I'd like to possibly do something about it or at least look at it.' So I had a meeting with The Guardian and they had come to talk about press regulation, but actually they said, 'We want to talk to you about the threat to our business and the economics because of the movement online and the decline in advertising and all the rest.' And they said, 'The thing which is potentially lethal to us is ad-blocking.' And it had never occurred to me before and I thought it was really interesting. So I said to the officials 'I want you to start looking at this: it's a serious problem, what is the effect, is it possible to do anything about it?' I was making a speech to the Royal Television Society and I said, 'Right, this is a really important issue, this is a theme for a speech.' It never would have occurred to them to suggest it as a theme. Then I convened round tables and we had in all the publishers, we had in Google and Facebook and we had internet service providers and we put it on to the agenda. I'm not sure we found any answers to it, I still don't know what the answers are, but at least we got people focussed on it and it remains an incredibly big problem for all the publishing industry who have had to adjust to the fact that people don't want to pay to get their news because they get it all online. They were just developing this new alternative revenue stream from advertising and suddenly that's been cut off as well. So that was the sort of thing where, if you're interested in the policy area, you suddenly find you're in a position where you can do things. You can say, 'Right, I'm going to summon a meeting on this.'

There were also areas where I had very strong views. I was always, very strongly, a defender of intellectual property rights because creative industries rely completely on copyright. There was this pressure from the tech companies to dilute copyright and the creative industries were very worried. I arrived and said, 'Right, we are now going to go in to defend copyright.' A lot of that was to do with Europe, but I was able to send out a clear message. Where you arrive with strong views, you can, if you're sitting in the secretary of state's chair, actually do things. These would be things where I probably wouldn't need clearance from Number 10 because they were purely departmental. They weren't going to be headlines in the Daily Mail, but within the brief they were very important. What I can't say is the extent to which you can do that in a junior minister's chair because I've never sat in one, but being a secretary of state you can.

**NH: So those are some successes. Was there anything, on the other hand, that you found frustrating about being a minister?**

**JW:** Oh yes! Well, I mean the propaganda wars. There was the BBC where 38 Degrees [campaign group] just went bananas, you know, thousands of emails! We had issued this consultation paper and it was a six-week consultation period and by five and a half weeks quite a lot of people had responded. But then in the last 48 hours, I think we got 100,000 and we ended up with 198,000 responses, and this was organised through 38 Degrees. To be fair, they weren't just cut and paste jobs, they were actually genuine responses. I wasn't sure that they were necessarily reflecting public opinion; they reflected a particular part of public opinion. That was quite frustrating, in a way. We had to deal with the 'Save the BBC' campaign, I mean half the BAFTAs was devoted to attacking me for wanting to dismantle the BBC. There was then Channel 4 who embarked on a very aggressive political lobbying campaign against privatisation - I had merely said I wanted to look at it. I had previously said there was a case for it but, you know, they went in quite strong; a lot of lobbying in the House of Lords and that sort of thing. Actually, because of the parliamentary arithmetic, even though I think the Prime Minister and Chancellor were quite sympathetic, the chances were we would struggle in the House of Lords. The government are still looking at it, but it became clear that it was going to be a very big fight and I'm not sure it was one that they particularly wanted.

Then, of course, the other thing I experienced was the sharp end of the press because I had a series of things written about me, some of which were true and some of which weren't true. The intense scrutiny - which is a price you pay and as a believer in press freedom, I still am, I accepted that was the price you pay - is very, very distressing when it happens to you. The pressure on families is quite difficult as well because, you know, I was sharing a flat with my son who was 22, and he'd leave the flat and encounter four TV cameras and people pointing microphones at him. I mean he actually coped reasonably well but it's not something that you expect to inflict upon your family. Even though it was only a couple of

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newspapers, they were very well-read. The government was very supportive, I never had any problem in terms of my colleagues and the Prime Minister was terrific about it. My department were brilliant, they were so supportive but, you know, it's still very painful.

And Twitter! I mean tips for incoming minister, you tweet because you now have to but don't read what other people say about you, it will be so depressing and so ridiculous but it's just not worth it.

**NH: So just thinking about your last few months in government, obviously the major thing going on was the EU referendum, the campaign around that, how did that affect your work as a minister?**

**JW:** Well, it was bizarre because for a lot of the time it was the elephant in the room. When I was appointed, I said to David Cameron, 'I'm really thrilled to be asked to do this job, it's the one job I always wanted to do and I didn't think I'd have the chance but there is something I'm going to have to tell you which is that I suspect I'm not going to be able to support you on Europe.' And he said, 'Well, I know that.' Because my track record is clear - I voted against Europe, against Maastricht right from the start. He said, 'I hope you'll wait and see what I come back with and make up your mind then.' I said, 'Yes, of course I will, but I think you're going to have a really hard time.' So he knew where I was coming from.

We then had a period of 10 months when we all knew the referendum was going to have to happen, but we didn't know when and it was just not mentioned. Very occasionally it would be referred to at Cabinet meetings or in committees. You know, we'd have the European Affairs Committee which Philip Hammond chaired as Foreign Secretary and we'd be discussing priorities for the 2018 European presidency and there'd be IDS and me and Grayling, we'd sit down one end and look at each other and one of us would eventually say, you know, 'But this does rather assume..!' The machinery of government was just assuming that we would still be in the European Union, so everything was planned on that basis and it was only difficult people like me who would occasionally say otherwise.

Well, I've always been in favour of leaving, but one of the reasons I became more strongly in favour was the number of times we were told we couldn't do something because of Europe or we had to do something because of Europe. Every now and again, when I was being told, you know, 'We really want to this but we're not allowed under European law,' I'd say, 'Well, there's an easy solution to that, isn't there!?' Officials would look mildly embarrassed at this point! But it was frustrating, you asked about frustrations, that was one of the things I knew was the case but actually I did encounter it almost daily. Things like the broadband rollout programme: in departmental terms, broadband was about one of the most difficult issues we were dealing with because it affected every MP, every MP could come up with a village in their constituency that had speeds of half a megabit or something, so the political pressure was enormous. We were spending a lot of money on the super-fast program and it required state-aid clearance and then the EU would set a deadline by which you had to get clearance. Then three areas missed it so we couldn't spend the money because we hadn't got permission to spend it. It seemed bizarre to me that, you know, the British Government wanted to spend British tax payers' money helping British citizens to get faster broadband speeds, but we were told we couldn't do it because of Europe. So that was the kind of frustration that you encountered. To give you another example, there was the general Data Protection Regulation, some of which everybody agreed was utterly unnecessary and would cost a fortune for British business, but it was imposed, so we had to do it. Pretty much every week we would be running into these European requirements which simply strengthened my view that we should come out.

**NH: Final question, you've mentioned a couple already but what would be the top tips you would give to an incoming minister?**

**JW:** I think success, to some extent, is not within your gift but success depends on, firstly, having a good permanent secretary, a good principal private secretary and special advisers who are plugged in but also know and understand you. They're very personal relationships; a good special adviser will almost know how you're going to react because they share your views and beliefs, they'll still come and talk to you but in a way they shouldn't have to because they should know your likely response. I then brought a specialist adviser as well, who was somebody who'd been my appointment to the select committee as a broadcasting adviser seven years previously, so he'd worked with me for years and he did a lot of the charter review stuff. He was invaluable because he was able, basically, to talk to the officials because he

knew my views on broadcasting so well because we'd worked together throughout the select committee. He was sitting alongside the BBC team and he was able to direct them into the sort of areas and the policies that I wanted without my having to tell them. So I think having a good core team around you is extremely important.

I think having a good relationship with your junior ministers and giving them a certain amount of responsibility but, at the same time, maintaining a pretty close and regular dialogue. I had an interesting experience in that after six months, Tracey Crouch disappeared to have a baby and we had a minister drafted in to cover for her. They appointed David Evennett who had been around for a very long time as a whip and loved the opportunity to be a minister, but knowing that it was for a limited time. That created handling issues as well, because Tracey had strong views and didn't want to think that somebody filling her job would go in a different direction. So I tried to keep in touch with Tracey as well as David, but equally, you wanted David to feel that he was a minister and not just somebody treading water until Tracey came back in; so there were handling issues there. As long as you get on with them and talk to them, you know, you are captain of the team and, therefore, keeping all your people happy is important.

The great thing about DCMS is it's a very enjoyable department, you do fun things and whatever brief you hold, you get the chance to go to concerts and football matches and galleries and all the rest. People going through DCMS generally love it because they are interesting issues too. Whereas there are other departments where maybe there is less scope for fun! Poor old Sajid Javid went from DCMS to BIS [Business, Innovation & Skills], I think he missed DCMS and kept saying, 'Well, of course, creative industry is incredibly important for BIS!' so he kept his hand in and still popped up at lots of things and then found himself in DCLG [Communities and Local Government] which, I think, is proving more challenging for him to do fun things!

**NH: I remember seeing a picture of Liz Truss at Defra going to visit a gin distillery, and I thought maybe that's the one I would do!**

**JW:** If you look hard, normally you can find some fun things to do!

**NH: Is there anything else you'd like to add that we've not asked about?**

**JW:** I mean there are lots of things, I could talk for hours about it! The First World War centenary, I hadn't looked at that at all, and DCMS's role in national events; it does things like Remembrance Sunday, so there was quite a lot of contact with the Royals and then the First World War commemoration was a massive, massive task, planning all of that. We got given responsibility for commemoration of terrorist attacks, liaison with families and that sort of thing, that was an area again where the officials were very good.

The relationship with the Permanent Secretary: I was very happy in that I think she was extremely good but she did her job and I did mine. We'd have a one-to-one once a week and she'd come and sit in on the big meetings but didn't say much. She made sure the department was running smoothly and generally she didn't bother me with things and I didn't bother her with things unless there was a real problem. But that is a very important relationship too.

**NH: And did you take an interest in the sort of more organisational, executive side of things?**

**JW:** Not as much. I was much more interested in policy. I mean I took an interest if it wasn't working, if the department wasn't delivering but generally it did. She would come to me and say, you know, 'There's these personnel changes or we need a director general or I'm thinking of promoting this person', or things about departmental funding. I mean, again, we had a very good director of finance and I didn't get involved in that, the allocation of budgets was left entirely to them. The departmental Board, I'm not sure how useful it was, it may have been useful to them more than it was to me. The departmental Board was about administrative efficiency and risk management and all the rest but it wasn't involved in policy setting. I mean that was an area where maybe some ministers do much more but I was so consumed with the policy questions, I probably didn't spend as much time on that as maybe I should have done.

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