

Ministers reflect

Nicky Morgan



December 2016

Nicky Morgan – biographical details

Electoral History

2010 – present: Member of Parliament for Loughborough

Parliamentary Career

2014 – 2016: Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities

April – July 2014: Financial Secretary to the Treasury and Minister for Women and Equalities

2013 – 2014: Economic Secretary to the Treasury

2012 – 2013: Government Whip

Nicky Morgan was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Nehal Davison on 19th December 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): Could we start with your first becoming a minister in the Treasury. I'd be interested to know about your prior experiences both in the private sector before Parliament and some of the things that you've done in Parliament, how useful were those as preparation for becoming a Treasury minister?

Nicky Morgan (NM): Being a government minister is the first time, working in Westminster, that you are back in a sort of normal working environment because Westminster itself, and certainly the House of Commons, is not a normal work environment in any way, shape or form. It's a campaigning environment. I'd never worked in politics before being elected in 2010, I'd always worked in a private sector, professional environment since leaving university, I suppose. I guess the Westminster bit teaches you part of the job about how Parliament works, how you liaise with colleagues, how things go down in constituencies, that sort of thing – which obviously in terms of developing things like Budget Statements and Autumn Statements is very useful. Then my private sector experience in terms of dealing with teams of employees, people needing feedback and appraisals, just treating people as colleagues but also as employees, was useful. That is not the way that the Palace of Westminster works at all, even though you've got your own little team of IPSA-funded [Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority] personnel as a Member of Parliament.

I think the extraordinary thing about being a minister is you can be pitched into a department where you have absolutely no prior knowledge of it at all. I mean, Treasury is one of those areas that we all have experience of and is interesting, it cuts right across government. So I don't know how I found myself in that position, but you do go from suddenly having no particular expertise to making decisions about tax policy or oil and gas which you don't have the background knowledge in.

NH: So what was it like in those first few weeks when you came into the Treasury? What was your experience?

NM: Well actually very positive and I was very lucky to work with a set of ministers, including the Chancellor, who were very supportive and also very good at letting you take baby steps to start off with. I think the first big thing I did was probably departmental questions, which was my first big exposure in the House, then lots of debates and everything else. I like debating, that's one of the things I liked doing as a minister, and also as a Member of Parliament, it's one of the things that I did at university a lot. So the public speaking element doesn't faze you at all, though obviously you're having to be very conscious of what you're saying; you've got collective responsibility and that sort of thing.

The first few weeks were fascinating. But it's very difficult because the civil servants, your private office, will put on briefing sessions for you, but to be honest with you at that stage you don't know what you don't know. You just have to get on with it and hopefully be supported and watched by your private office and by others to stop you making mistakes which actually six months down the line you would know far better how to handle.

NH: Absolutely. So what did you see as the job description of a minister and how did you get your head round how government works?

NM: Well the job depends on the department and I think it depends on your characteristics and everything else. Somebody once said to me that as a minister you're there to exercise good judgement; you're not there to know the nuances of every single fine detail of the policy. You are there to bring a politician's head to it, to think about how things are going to be reacted to by people out in the country, in a way that officials are not there to do. They're there to be the policy experts and to advise you and you're there to say 'This is the problem, this is what we want, what are the options?' and then to make a decision, whether you make it on your own or you make it in conjunction with others. And of course you've also got to be aware of the broader sweep of government policy. So for example a government of my party is never going to be one for massively putting up taxes, so that's not going to be the answer, whereas in other hues that might be something that's considered more readily. You're aware of the wider

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political landscape and in my case particularly about the need to control public spending, which means you haven't got lots of money to throw at every problem.

NH: And you did two different roles in the Treasury?

NM: I did. I was Economic Secretary for about six months and I was Financial Secretary for three months.

NH: And was there a big difference between the roles?

NM: Not really, no. I kept the same portfolio. Because I was in the Treasury already, I think for the Financial Secretary job I added a couple of things to the portfolio. I also became the Minister for Women when I became Financial Secretary, so that was a whole new area and office to get used to working with. Which was great – really, really interesting.

NH: What was your initial impression of the Treasury and the policy advice that you were getting from civil servants?

NM: It was very high quality; they are regarded as some of the best civil servants in the business. The Treasury is a fascinating department to be in because you're right at the heart of things, and particularly working for the Chancellor I worked for, you know, he was at the heart of everything and government decisions got made with George Osborne being heavily involved. Seeing an Autumn Statement process and then seeing the Budget process is incredibly useful and certainly for the next department I went to it was incredibly useful to have that Treasury knowledge. I hadn't been through a spending round in the Treasury but just to see how decisions are taken and to know how budget documents are drafted was really, really invaluable.

NH: Yes. So let's talk a bit more then about that move from Treasury to Education. Did you know it was coming?

NM: No, no. It was a complete surprise. You literally just get a call. I mean there was talk about a reshuffle, but actually I had been led to believe, and I think it was the case, that George was happy with the Treasury team and he wasn't anticipating a move before the general election. Then the phone goes at sort of twenty to ten, twenty to nine I think, on a Tuesday morning: 'Can you come to Downing Street in about ten minutes?' and I said 'Yes' and they said 'Exactly ten minutes' and that's it! You don't know anything until you sit down in front of the Prime Minister. I mean, actually there wasn't even speculation in my case because I really didn't think I was on the radar for a promotion, I was talked about vaguely but not in specific terms. So yeah, it was a nice surprise, but it was a surprise!

NH: You were saying before about when you get a ministerial job you're straight into it. What was it like going straight over to the new role?

NM: I think I went back to the Treasury, picked up my stuff and said 'I'm off' and then literally within about half an hour I was arriving at the Department for Education [DfE]. None of the civil servants in the DfE expected there to be a move either, although I think they knew that their previous Secretary of State had been headline news for a bit, and so they were busy trying to sort of sort things out. They did remarkably well, given that it was a shock for everybody concerned. Of course you don't have the luxury of having been in opposition and then being elected to government to think 'OK I've had time to prepare my policy programmes and what I want to do' you've got to hit the ground running. You're inheriting other people's policies and then potentially making changes, because obviously normally the PM will say 'I'd like you to do more of this or less of that' or whatever it is. So you're trying to make the machine do that. The only saving grace was that actually it was just at the end of the Parliamentary term, July, so I think I had about a week and then it was recess and then the pressure was off a bit. Nobody expects to hear from you that often in recess.

NH: So how did you get your head round the whole world of education?

NM: Yeah, it does take a long time. I think the thing about education is it's one of those areas, again, where everybody's got an interest, everybody is a constituency Member of Parliament and visits local

schools, or is a parent of a child in a state school - so you have your own take on it. Of course you've got to then make sure it's not just about what you think, it's actually an informed take, and you learn a huge amount, it's the language as much as anything. I think I tried to say not very much to start off with, whilst trying to work out where the problems were. A couple of times I would ask my predecessor 'This has come up for a decision which is something you were looking at, what did you think about it?' and that was very helpful to have him around to be able to ask questions. The big thing I had to deal with immediately was the Trojan Horse issue in Birmingham. We had to give a statement, that was on the last day I think of Parliament sitting. The second was that we had education questions about six days after the reshuffle. It was fine, you know enough about it and luckily my ministers hadn't changed I don't think - Nick Gibb came back, but he'd been in Education before, Sam Gymiah was new. So that helps enormously, if you've got junior ministers who also know their brief. David Laws was there and Edward Timpson who both knew their briefs incredibly well, they were great. Although that's good and it's bad as it means you wonder 'Do they know more than you?', and sometimes they are taking decisions where you're thinking 'Well I probably should be more aware of what's going on'. Actually we had a good ministerial team so we trusted each other, so that wasn't really an issue.

NH: You mentioned before Whitehall being like a professional environment with appraisals and things. How did you go about managing your ministerial team?

NM: Well I had regular meetings with them. We did ask them, I think after the election, to write out what their priorities were, what they wanted to do. We had weekly team meetings involving ministers and parliamentary private secretaries and special advisers and I think people from private offices sat in as well. We got one of the ministers each week to talk about something they were doing and that's really useful and important, for people to hear what else is going on in the department. I think we also just tried to create a bit more of a team atmosphere, which I think had been lacking. So we did also things like socials as well outside; just getting people together for drinks is really important. I don't think I appraised the ministers, I would help with civil service appraisals, the senior civil servants, directors and perm sec and so on. I was involved with them. That's the really weird thing about being a minister, because on the one hand you've got these civil servants, you've got people you're dealing with on a daily basis, you need them to be good, reliable and work hard, and that's what they do. But you're not really involved in appointing them or managing them. So it's very different from a professional environment.

NH: What was the transition from being at minister of state level in Treasury to being the Secretary of State, what was the difference in the role and the responsibilities?

NM: I think it's the public facing side. You are 'it'. And in a meeting when there's a tough issue or anything else, all heads will swivel to you. You've got to be the one to deliver the bad news or to ask the tough question or to point out that actually the advice that's been given is just not good enough. It is a whole new step up. You are responsible, along with the perm sec, for in my case 3,000 people, and the department. Is it delivering, are you pulling in the right direction? I think the nature of media coverage these days is that, you know, you don't have long. If you make a mistake you haven't got very long before it's crawled all over, analysed and everything else. And of course we're not really allowed to say 'Well, actually that didn't go so well, or this is what I was thinking' or anything like that.

As a minister of state, in some ways it's frustrating because obviously you've got somebody who can override your decision making. As a secretary of state you do have the ability to say 'We're just not doing that', or 'We're not doing it this way', or 'We're going to do something different' and to set new priorities, and people will respond to that, which is also very encouraging.

NH: What were your big priorities?

NM: Well, academies and the white paper, really. To be honest with you, trying to take the temperature down a bit on education was the big thing before the election. Then really pulling together a white paper which was actually trying to look at how does a whole system, with academies, free schools, local authority involvement, how does it all fit together? How do you make sure you finish off the curriculum reforms, finish off the teaching qualification reforms? And also things like character education, mental wellbeing. But then we've also got children's social care which gets completely overlooked - massive reforms going on there attempting to build much needed quality - and then childcare, delivery of the manifesto promises on childcare. There was plenty going on. The other thing was the whole education

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skills and apprenticeships agenda as well, which was Nick Boles' area. So yeah, we weren't short of anything to do. And of course the department's even bigger now.

NH: I'll have to put this delicately, but your predecessor was quite a big character and had quite a heated relationship with the education world. Did you see part of your role as you said about taking the temperature down, how did you go about that resetting?

NM: I mean, we are very different people so I think just not being him and being myself was one thing. That's also difficult though because I think some people love that, some of the media absolutely love that combative nature. Of course it makes good stories, it's good for selling newspapers or getting on the airwaves, and when they don't get that, they regard that as disappointing, they regard that as you're clearly taking your foot off the pedal, you're U-turning all over the place and everything else. People are looking all the time for signs, 'Oh, you're letting up on the reforms', well I would argue we pushed on with the reforms absolutely, and actually as you saw, ultimately some of the teaching unions, conferences and everything else gave me probably just as much of a roasting as they would have given him. I think colleagues here in Westminster said they were able to go into schools and have conversations with heads and teachers and everything else in a way that they weren't before 2014 because there was such a controversy about some of the reforms, actually people then weren't able to look underneath them to engage in discussions with local schools.

NH: You brought in your own special advisers rather than inherit Michael's?

NM: I did. Yeah you see that's one of the things, obviously when you get a step up like I did and also I guess if you haven't been in opposition and you go straight in, you don't have your own special advisers. When I was a minister of state, I was asking Number 10 if I could have a special adviser, from the April to the July 2014, and it was sort of 'No, no, no there are going to be more changes let's just leave it and let's just see'. I think there are some very good special advisers around Westminster, and if their boss loses their job then they'll be looking for somebody else to work for. I think they knew obviously there was a big reshuffle coming and 'Let's just see' what's going to happen. Then I arrived and I think, because it was such a shock, Michael's special advisers were in a state of absolute shock and it wasn't very clear whether they were going to - could they - stay, should they stay, should they go with him? It became very rapidly clear that actually you do need your own people, you need people who are without baggage, as it were. They also want that; it's such a personal relationship, I think having that relationship with another secretary of state in the same department must be very, very difficult. So yeah, it became very clear. Then of course you're looking around thinking 'I've no idea where to find people' and again it's a personal fit. You are more reliant on recommendations and meeting people and thinking 'Actually is this the sort of person that I can work with?' than anything else. Mine would have to deal not just with education but also the women and equalities role as well, which all three special advisers had an interest in, although one in particular focused on it.

NH: Did you ever find it difficult balancing the two roles, women and education?

NM: Yes. I mean I tried very hard not to let this happen, but there was a real danger that women and equalities would get squeezed out, because education is such a big portfolio and getting bigger, that I think you need a secretary of state who is going to be really keen and enjoys all that. There are great synergies as well, so things like anti-bullying, you can do it from an equalities angle but you can also do it from an education angle and actually putting those together or girl's aspirations, that sort of thing, fits really, really well. So I think they work together well as roles and I got David Cameron to agree to a machinery of government change so that Government Equalities Office came over from sitting in DCMS [Department for Culture Media & Sport] to sitting in the Education Department and that was quite tricky and quite traumatic. But I think it was needed because that meant they were then both within the department. I felt like they were part of the bigger department.

Nehal Davison (ND): Moving on to the day-to-day reality of the Education Department, how did you actually spend your time? What did a typical week look like?

NM: Well, the thing is there is no typical week. That's the extraordinary thing, I think no two days are the same! I'm also obviously a very active constituency MP, I've got a marginal seat, or had a marginal seat so when I was first appointed, I was there trying to defend for the first time my marginal seat that

I'd won off the opposition at the 2010 election. So I had to spend significant amounts of time there in Loughborough, and campaign for the Party elsewhere. So you're juggling lots of different things. It would tend to be Monday 'til Wednesday in London and then Thursday tended, if we could do it, to be four days, or it might be other things, like if there was BBC Question Time, preparation for that. I might start the day in London on a Thursday but then try to make sure I got out so that I got home as well. Then Friday, Saturday, Sunday obviously in the constituency. It's a question of trying to do some constituency stuff, obviously because you've still got staff here in Westminster who need you and you've still got constituents writing to you about all kinds of other things. Then in the department: meetings, lots of internal meetings. Particularly I think, post-election, lots of those were about establishing priorities, we spent a long time on that because the Cabinet Office wanted all government departments to be very clear about their priorities and come up with these plans. So we spent a lot of time working on that and then working out how we were going to hold the department to account for delivering those plans. And actually I think we did it really well. I think we got it where the Cabinet Office were happy with where we were headed on all of that. But it requires quite a lot, you've got to have quite a lot of face time for senior officials who need to be able to explain to you what's going on in certain areas.

ND: And how effective was that relationship with civil servants and your wider private office during that time?

NM: Well I think it was good. I had a very good private office. I mean people come and go and we also set up, and I think unfortunately it's being disbanded, an 'extended ministerial office' [EMO]. David Cameron was very keen on that. I think because he'd been a special adviser and I think he had a particular view on that being necessary. I didn't have a particular view but I was happy to give it a go, and actually I think it worked very well. So you've got the private office as civil servants, you've got the EMO, and I had probably by the end about six of them, who are people who really know their briefs, they were great for things like funding allocations, equalities, primary assessment, the school structures. I mean, I don't think we'd have got the white paper published without them. They were great, and they were all pulling in the same direction. They were the ones able to say 'Hang on a second, how does this fit?' They would talk to each other, they all sat together so they could hear what the other ones were doing. Then you've got the special advisers who obviously are the political appointees and they were obviously talking to the press and stakeholders and others, making sure things land and being linked up to the election, they're a vital link with the party machinery so that the party knows what the departments are doing as well. Then there are lots of visits, visits are great, I liked getting out and I think it's very easy to drop the visits because it's all in a 'slightly difficult' box but it's absolutely essential, particularly with schools. Schools like to see you, they like you to go out there and actually it's great because that's the way you get feedback. I think on one of the GCSEs the title changed because somebody said to me 'Why are we calling it this? Why don't we call it this?' and I was like 'Yes why don't we, that's a good idea, let's change it'. So that's essential. Then I suppose there are regular things: Cabinet, PMQs, regular Westminster type things, debates. And I'd try to come back over the road from the department to Westminster in evenings really, to see colleagues but also just to be in the House for votes.

ND: How did you manage all of that? It's a lot!

NM: Well, I slept a lot less than I had done before. I mean it is a crazy system. People complain about Members of Parliament having outside jobs, but I mean the ultimate outside job is being a minister. Because it is fairly all consuming, and of course you don't just finish in the evening, you then go home and do a box for several hours, and you've got to try and pace that and try and not to exhaust yourself, because actually that's the time when you become ill and then you lose perspective. So it's really important that you do balance all these things. Then of course you've got weekends, constituency, family, another box, massive box, six hours' worth of work every weekend arrives on a Saturday morning... it is a juggle. I think the honest truth is there's never a period when you're not working. Or very, very infrequently – summer holidays, Christmas holidays.

ND: Could you talk through an example of when an unexpected crisis or event struck and how you dealt with that?

NM: I suppose the primary assessment – when we found out that one of the test papers had been on the website, unwittingly, for several months. It was only spotted when the teachers opened the actual test

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papers and went 'We recognise this; we've seen this already'. That was really, really unfortunate. I think the department had just about picked it up. I picked it up, as one of the things that I think the civil servants were not terribly impressed with was the fact that I check all my emails myself that come in to my account here in Parliament, so a teacher emailed me I think complaining about it, or somebody did on Twitter, and that's how I spotted what had happened. I'm trying to remember now, Nick Gibb did a statement to Parliament which I sat alongside, I think we admitted the mistake very quickly, we made a very quick decision that the paper just wasn't going to count, which is very frustrating for people who work very hard to prepare for it. But I think speed is of the essence in that sort of thing, and you just drop everything else. I can't remember what else I was meant to be doing but I mean, one of the unsung heroes of a private office is the diary secretary, I had Hannah, Michelle and then Claire, who spent their entire time rearranging stuff. It's constant, constant. Everybody knows everything you do is subject to something happening, Parliamentary business and everything else. But on that one I think we reacted really quickly. Probably not quick enough for some people. There was another mistake, which by that point we were already on to, about the Standards and Testing Agency and the way that they had not performed properly on the checks. There were consequences for the Civil Service, financial consequences, because of what happened. On the one hand you think 'Well I know everybody works terribly hard', but people need to realise that this sort of thing is so important and people are reliant on us, on government, to get it right.

ND: You said speed was of the essence, what was the balance between reacting to the media and having to be the front face for that, but also just fixing the problem?

NM: Well I think we didn't send everybody out; I think fixing the problem was the big thing. I mean you've got a whole press office there, so frankly they can put together a statement that's a sort of holding line but admits the mistake publicly and recognises 'Hands up, we got this wrong, this is not acceptable, we're investigating what's happened'. Then making a very swift decision, in this case not to run the paper. And actually when that happened the civil service were very good about saying 'OK, this is what we, the minister and the private office think should happen'. That's where your private office are essential because they need to be picking the phone up and going 'The Secretary of State is really unimpressed, what are you going to do about it? What is the advice? We need something now'. But you've got to be the person at the top who's got a very clear sense, very swiftly, of what you think should happen. Then you test it out and officials may say 'Well that's not going to work', or 'Yes absolutely, we could just do that'.

ND: And if there was one piece of advice you could give to a minister who's dealing with a similar crisis, what would it be?

NM: Well you yourself have to remain quite calm, you want to get to the bottom of it, but at that moment when something hits, you're never going to have all the facts. So you've got to make the best possible decision and make sure you've got people around you who you trust who will give you advice at that moment. But ultimately the responsibility is on your shoulders, so you've got to make that best possible decision, knowing that something else might emerge. It was very clear in that case, it was a test paper that went up there, it shouldn't have been in the pack, what are you going to do about it? And I think empathy as well, I think empathy in that situation which is not trying to be overly defensive, but also recognising that you've put an awful lot of people in a difficult position, people have worked very hard and then those kids then can't take that test.

ND: Moving on to other things that you've achieved in office, which achievement in office are you most proud of?

NM: Well although bits of it won't necessarily see the light of day, I think the white paper. Pulling together a white paper which attempted to answer the question of 'Where is our school system going?' I mean it's tricky when you're no longer there and other people come in and they'll do bits and pieces and things get pulled apart and it doesn't suit what's happening at the time.

But I think getting that white paper done. It was drafted pretty swiftly in terms of I think how long white papers can take. And it was trying to answer questions like 'What happens next?' I kept being asked by schools 'Do you want us to become academies? What does the system look like?' And so it was

attempting to answer that question, rather than just doing piecemeal policy making. Some of the bits of it will stick and some of it obviously might take longer to see the light of day.

ND: What made it particularly successful for you?

NM: I think probably the Department really, they all contributed. Everybody worked incredibly hard on it and obviously it was on the schools side of things, but it was a big team effort. Everyone from the Perm Sec downwards. I think they liked it as well, being able to think forward not just react to day-to-day issues. I think it was an example of the department really getting where we were headed and saying ‘Let’s see how we can make all this hang together’.

ND: At the Institute we do a lot of work on how policies are made, can you talk us through an example, potentially from the white paper, about how you went about making policy decisions?

NM: Well, fairer funding is probably a good example. That has actually been announced, the second stage last week, but that is a part of it which is in the 2015 manifesto: we’d said that we wanted to have fairer funding across the country. We’d come back after 2015 got some really top-notch civil servants, not always the most senior, but people who really got this. Then I had somebody in the extended ministerial office whose job was to particularly focus on this issue, because it is very technical, and they worked through it and they put a huge amount of effort into it all. We did the first stage and the second stage. It was high-needs funding as well and a separate consultation on early years. We worked with the Treasury and with Number 10, some tricky issues.

There was lots of Parliamentary handling as well for MP colleagues, because there’d be some of their schools that would be losing. I think the other thing I was trying to do, and I did this generally, was to get comms people involved early on in policy development. How are we going to explain it, sell it, get people to understand it? We had this debate slightly with academies, when what became clear talking to colleagues was that some people don’t understand why you’re doing what you’re doing, so you need to explain ‘This is why we’re doing it and this is what it actually means to devolve power to the front line’; for some people that was just outside of their experience. Why do we need to change the funding formula: trying to put in human terms that if you’ve got one area that’s taking £800 per pupil more than another area, what does that actually mean for schools and books and teachers?

ND: And you mentioned working with Number 10 and the Treasury, how did that work in practice?

NM: Mainly the links were made between special advisers and civil servants and private offices, so you had three different strands. You had private secretaries talking to each other, obviously civil servants in their sectors or areas of interest, as it were, and then you had the special advisers. And then the ministers would come in. So it might be that we would start by having a conversation, minister to minister, or PM to me, and then that would get translated down into lots of work happening, lots of discussions. Then eventually there were log-jams or problems so it would get escalated back up. Your spads or officials would say ‘If you see the Chancellor at Cabinet can you have a word and say such and such...’ The PM and I did have fairly regular bilateral meetings too, and actually that would be the time to potentially put something really tricky on the agenda. So I suppose it’s multi-layered basically, involving both political appointees and also civil servants.

ND: And what about outside groups? To what extent did external stakeholders play a role in the process?

NM: Well, they did a bit on fairer funding. There’s a group of local authorities, obviously there’s the teaching unions who have got their views, academy chains and that sort of thing. But the trouble is that education is so diverse, there’s so many vested interests. So I guess you always have to think about when somebody is giving you their spiel, their explanation – what’s in it for them? I mean, it’s trying to understand where people are coming from. I think the most talented stakeholders in terms of their lobbying recognise that and reflect it in what they’re saying: ‘We are an academy chain so we would say this, wouldn’t we?’ The more that they can give less emotive, more practical examples of what’s happening, the better basically – because that’s the thing that really sinks in, as opposed to the very

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emotive, very ideological pitches where you just think ‘OK, I’ve got to sit here and listen to this, but it’s not really going to take us much further forward’.

ND: And how did you deal with any opposition to policies?

NM: I guess again you have to ask why it is there. Is it genuinely because you haven’t listened or because you have gone too far down one road and you’re not balancing different interests? To be fair, some of the teaching unions will be honest about this, they just disagreed with the thrust of Conservative education policy. And once you got over that, it helped. I can’t remember who, one of the secretaries of the unions, he said to me ‘My role is basically to stop the system changing too much, but if you accept that then can I tell you why I’ve got an issue with this or that you’re doing’. I was like ‘OK, fine’, because actually once you know where you’re both coming from then you can have a proper discussion.

NH: So some of our previous interviewees, education ministers, have talked about the levers for change in education: you’ve got so many teachers and schools out there, it’s sometimes about winning hearts and minds as well as pulling legislative or standards levers. Did you find that? How do you affect change in such a big system?

NM: Well that’s the thing, I mean you have got 24,000 schools. So I can say whatever I like in DfE, but actually there’s all these schools out there. What’s extraordinary, and I think this is probably something about the education sector and the profession, is that actually if the DfE says something, people do respond. I was always amazed. Sometimes I think in the private sector, there can be bodies that say ‘Our professionals are going to do X and Y’ and the profession goes ‘No, they’re not’, whereas in education people tend to be much more willing. For example, we have this issue with workload and we did some working groups about marking and lesson planning and data collection. And some of the problems come from people over-interpreting what’s needed; I think there’s the worry there about Ofsted inspections and everything else.

So you’re right, a lot of it is about tone and nuance, well I say nuance, but it’s about tone and explaining things as much as it is about legislation. Sometimes you want legislation, it’s necessary, sometimes legislation, it’s symbolic as much as anything. You’re taking on coasting and failing schools, but actually what’s really going to lift the quality of education is the quality of teaching. Whitehall can only do so much about that in the sense that you can put in place teacher training and institutions and set quality thresholds for those who become teachers, but ultimately it’s about the profession being really good and taking responsibility to the front-line, taking responsibility for their own professional development, or whatever it might be. Having really good head teachers and others share their experience across the system. It’s much, much more powerful. And it’s what we are seeing, it’s happening. It does work. I think what we don’t do enough is explain why. What’s very interesting is that actually, and I don’t think I made this clear enough, the Education Secretary is there to be on the side of not just teachers and schools, but on the side of pupils. Because most kids only get one shot at education, so it’s got to work for them. I think sometimes you’re attacked when you go to various conferences about ‘You’ve forgotten the teachers’ and everything else – well yeah, but teachers have got people to fight their corner, the people who most need the government to get it right in education are the pupils.

NH: How did you get a feel for what was going on, on the front line?

NM: Well, the visits. Visits are essential. Obviously I signed hundreds, thousands of letters and replying to all of them – again you have to think actually, why is this person telling me this? Are they genuinely trying to be helpful, is it something we should take up? Or is that they just don’t like thrust over all of the policy? So sometimes your reply would say ‘We think it’s necessary, we think it’s working and we might have to agree to disagree on that’. But the visits, constituency stuff, what other MPs tell you is going on – all of those are really, really important and you do build a picture. Of course you’re a minister, you’re not there, you’re not working in a staff room, you’re not there doing a front-line position for a week or a term or anything like that, so you’ve got to remember of course you’re always shown the best of things, probably, when you go to a school, not the day on when the boiler breaks and Ofsted turn up which is always much more challenging.

NH: Moving on then, was there anything that you found frustrating about being a minister?

NM: Well, I think it's quite extraordinary that we put people in these positions with absolutely no training whatsoever. No transitional period, no handover period, I mean it is mindboggling. People outside government, outside Whitehall, cannot believe that that happens. You say to anybody 'Yeah, I became Secretary of State – I have a department, am able to make decisions' just like that, it is extraordinary. I don't know how you could do it, whether you could end up having some kind of transitional period or whatever it might be. Or at least the ability just to sit there for some time and think 'Well actually what are the priorities? What needs to happen?' Also, I suppose you don't get to pick your own team so if you get ministers you get on with that's great, because it makes such a difference.

There is also that funny old thing about that line between ministers and officials. Yes, you can direct things, you can say 'I don't want you doing this, I don't want you doing that', but you're only there for a limited period of time. So you actually don't know what's going on. If you ask for a period of piecemeal work not to be happening, or to be happening, you don't always get it. I mean there are things I asked for which after two years I still never saw the result of, never made that visit. There's no doubt other people have agendas, not necessarily bad agendas, but just 'I know she says she wants to go on a visit, but actually it's just not as important as that'. So that was hard, you've got 3,000 people working for you who are not really working for you. They're working for the department and you just happen to be in the department for a period of time. And if you make an impact, that's great – but does anyone notice if you don't make an impact? It's a question mark. I never, for example, visited the DfE satellite offices around the country. We talked about it a lot, but somehow it just never happened. You think actually no boss in a private sector would be in their job two years and not go and visit their other offices. But why did it not happen? We talked about it enough. Just never made it in to the diary.

NH: Looking across government then, how would you, if you could, make it more effective?

NM: I think limited reshuffles. Letting people really get their feet under the desk is really important. Obviously if there are square pegs in round holes then I think no-one should be made to stay somewhere that's just not right for anyone. I do think the extended ministerial office worked really well for us and I think particularly, if you're a government department with a big reform programme, it does help to have additional people who are not private secretaries, but are there to push particular policies and to hold officials' feet to the fire to make sure that things happen in a way that aligns with your priorities and they are dropping things that aren't the priority.

I think we spent a lot of time, and I understand it's still going on, of 'Let's just not tell Number 10'. I understand why, because there's so much control from the centre. You've got to let government departments get on with things; if you've got to clear every announcement, every this, every that, then it really just slows thing down.

NH: Particularly on media and public facing things?

NM: Yeah media and public facing and obviously, I think again I can understand why. You don't want 16 government departments all announcing some big thing on the same day, that would be a complete waste of time. But there were lots of things that just took forever, 'Oh, it's a bit controversial, we won't do that, let's just wait a bit'. You just think 'Actually, it just needs to get out there', things like responses to select committees, it's just got to get out the door, it's going to get worse and worse if it doesn't. It's not going to help if you delay it, because then we're going to be subject to questions in the House and letters to the Speaker and all that sort of thing.

I suppose government does an awful lot and maybe one of the things about Brexit is going to be that actually because government's got to focus on Brexit, it can't do lots of other things. That may actually – although Brexit is massive and is going to result in lots of new policies – that may not be such a bad thing. There is a constant churn of keeping Westminster busy, keeping MPs busy with lots of legislation; this place is a sausage factory, it relies on legislation to keep it moving. But on the other hand, having lots of legislation is not always a good thing. It's that sort of balancing act isn't it? Keeping the House of Commons and the House of Lords happy as well, which I think is tricky. When I came in to DfE, in my first nine months, we had no legislation because of the impending election and actually that was quite

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nice. You could just get on with actually implementing things and pushing things forward, not having to worry about what's going on here.

NH: And just to touch on the last year or so, first of all did the move from coalition to Conservative majority in 2015 make a difference to you in your role?

NM: It did a bit, I obviously had David Laws as a junior minister. I suppose what it meant was that ideas got discussed less, everyone in the room technically agreed with each other because they were all from the same party. I think probably that meant that some things were discussed less, before they were announced publicly or were sent to Number 10 or whatever it might be. That's a good thing in many ways, but I think also that challenge is quite good to have. It did also mean sometimes that slowed things down because you'd know something needed to happen but that just didn't suit one or other party, so it wouldn't get announced. So yes there was definitely a difference and I think it took a while for the Civil Service to get used to it. They coped admirably with coalition but I think it took a while for them to realise they were back into one-party government.

NH: Did you feel like, when you came back after the election, you've got to refresh the agenda, come up with new stuff or was it more of a continuation of what you were doing before?

NM: It was more of a continuation. I think probably what it meant was that we could now push on with things like the white paper, things like children's social care reform. We had the manifesto, we've got the commitments there and actually education had a number of commitments, but nothing that was a dramatically big departure, so it really was then like we've got the mandate – we can now push on with doing all these things. So it was a lot more about implementation – setting goals, setting priorities, implementation – than it was about doing wholly new things. That's quite nice in a way: how are we going to deliver 500 free schools, how is the academies thing going to roll out, how do we deal with the coasting failing schools? It was good to be able to do that without the pressure of worrying about how policy would play in the election campaign because that was the big pressure for nine months before the election.

NH: And then of course the other big thing was the referendum campaign. Did that affect your work?

NM: Oh, hugely. Absolutely hugely. We'd got the white paper out and we got that out because we managed to tie it in with the Budget, George had wanted education to be a key part of the 2016 Budget, so that was a negotiation with him. So we got the white paper, proposed full academisation, which then proved to be not terribly popular with colleagues in the Conservative Party, so we had to water that down. Then the referendum, unfortunately, basically it just froze everything. As I say the academisation stuff was probably the last big announcement and that was in May, but everything else had been frozen really since March. Lots of things, things like select committee responses, but also other announcements that we wanted to do. I had an agreement with David Cameron about PSHE and curriculum for life stuff. We'd agreed in April that we would announce something in July and push on with that. There was more stuff to do on transgender, but it was all deemed to be for 'No, let's just leave it 'til after the referendum and then we can push on with it'. And of course that moment never came.

NH: Did you have leavers in your team?

NM: Only the House of Lords minister John Nash, who was very, very good and very low key, yeah. So in that sense it was fine. I didn't have a split ministerial team, and I wasn't on one side and all the ministers were on the other, so we didn't have any sort of hoo-ha about that. But there's no doubt that the oxygen and the attention of government was sucked out of it whilst the focus was on the referendum. We all had to campaign as well and I was quite a vocal remain campaigner. So it did all end up getting terribly focused on that. Which was a real shame actually, I feel I lost the last six months of being in the job.

NH: Looking back across all of that experience, what would be the top pieces of advice you would give to a new minister?

NM: I think 'Take time to understand the brief'. Really think about what your priorities are and don't have too many of them, up to three. Particularly if you're a junior minister, two or three priorities is more than enough. Ask what can I make my own, what is it that needs to be tackled? So for example when I was in the Treasury as Economic Secretary, Air Passenger Duty was a big thing and we did actually get some movement on that, George understood that.

I think the other thing is regard the officials as your... I was going to say your allies but they're not the enemy, they are there to help you. But also be prepared to push back, don't accept the first piece of advice always, and treat them as professionals and I think they will be on your side because mostly they want to help you deliver your policy priorities. Don't be afraid to push back, when you get the Number 10 'No, no you can't do that', but choose your battles and push back within reason.

NH: Is there anything that we haven't asked about that you would like to add?

NM: The only other thing is media. I mean, again, people cannot understand that ministers, particularly if you're a secretary of state, you're out there and you're exposed and all the rest of it, there's no training. Unless the Party does it, which I did a bit before the general election. Again it is quite, quite staggering.

The other thing, I think, was that I did have a couple of meetings with the PM, and again I tried very hard to have regular meetings with my own ministers, but I do find it extraordinary that you don't have much face-time. The PM is effectively your boss – and OK, he or she is very busy as the Head of Government - but actually, maybe more regular meetings would help in terms of the central control. If they knew what you were doing, then it would not be a surprise when somebody goes and announces it. But I think that absence of regular face-time with your own boss when you're secretary of state is very different from life outside or in the private sector, basically.

NH: As an aside on that, what was your experience of Cabinet and Cabinet committees?

NM: Well, they changed. In coalition, Nick Clegg did a lot of the chairing of Cabinet Sub-Committees, and then after the general election we had more task forces; the Extremism Taskforce, the Immigration Taskforce.

I mean, Cabinet is very interesting, you get to hear about what other people are up to, such as Foreign Affairs – I'm not a particular Foreign Affairs wonk but I mean they are very interesting, the discussions. It's not scripted, but it's very much 'This is the agenda and this is what we're going to discuss'. You almost wonder why there isn't an AOB which would probably be the most interesting bit – what's actually on your mind today. The other thing is that probably as people are longer together in Cabinet, they understand more how to use it and how to put forward their views. I think the other bit of advice, particularly to a new secretary of state or new member of the Cabinet, is don't say very much to start off with. See what the lie of the land is and then think about when you can most make an impactful contribution, and that should be the opportunity that you take.

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