

Ministers reflect

Oliver Letwin

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Oliver Letwin – biographical details

Electoral History

1997 – present: Member of Parliament for West Dorset

Parliamentary Career

June – July 2016: Director of the Brexit Unit (Cabinet Office)

2014 – 2016: Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

2010 – 2014: Minister of State for Government Policy (Cabinet Office)

Oliver Letwin was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Jill Rutter on 15th December 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): You had worked on the whole Conservative policy platform before coming into government in 2010. How did you find it having worked up ideas in opposition, then trying to implement them in government?

Oliver Letwin (OL): Well, there were some things which would be very obvious to anyone that knows the history of the thing, in the sense that we had prepared a programme for a Conservative government and we didn't end up with a Conservative government. So, the first change was that we had to reconstruct the programme. Some of that went on during the first four or five days when we were trying to put the coalition together in the first place. Then a much more detailed round of it went on when Danny Alexander and I, and Steve Hilton and Polly MacKenzie and James O'Shaughnessy [advisers] put together what became the Programme for Government which was a more detailed document. It was essentially an attempt to combine our policy programme with the Liberal Democrats policy programme, and of course to reflect those things that had already been agreed in the coalition agreement as well as others.

We decided that because it was a coalition we needed to settle quite specifically a whole series of things that if we'd been an ordinary, majority government we might not have bothered to write down. So this became a kind of contract between the two parties and the rules of the road were that this could not be added to or subtracted from without subsequent agreement. There was a structure of Cabinet Committees that we created in a separate, parallel set of discussions to ensure that the government as a whole would abide by and enforce those rules. That had a consequence, which was that the departmental business plans – which were really at that stage lists of to do actions stemming from our policy programme that we developed in opposition, that we were intending to use as the basis for monitoring implementation of our manifesto by each department – obviously also had to be adjusted to bring them into line with the Programme for Government that had been agreed at coalition level, rather than simply soldiering on as if the original Conservative manifesto was still the governing document. So those business plans also, I think, became more important than they would have been in a Conservative-only administration, in the sense that they too obtained a sort of contractual status. They meant that ministers of different parties in the same ministries and secretaries of state from different sides of the coalition were all bound by the list of actions to be conducted in the business plans. That made the agreements of the Programme for Government much easier to monitor and ensure that they were implemented.

And as to the substance, there were some significant changes -- although as a matter of fact (that's why the coalition worked in the first place) the overlaps between the people who had been responsible for the Liberal Democrat manifesto and people like me who had been responsible for the Conservative manifesto were great -- so I can't say that the eventual, resulting Programme for Government was dramatically different from either our or their manifesto. I think the main difference was the extent to which the document then became genuinely the governing document that did actually determine essentially the entirety of the domestic policy agenda of the government over the next three years.

NH: Looking back now do you think having that structure of the committees and plans, do you think that worked effectively as a governing mechanism?

OL: Yes, I do. The committee structure I negotiated, as I say separately but in parallel, with Jim Wallace rather than with Danny Alexander. Jim had been the head of the Liberal Democrat part of the Scottish government coalition so he had a lot of real life experience of running coalitions, which the rest of us of course lacked. I was very happy to listen to what he said about how they worked and it was his suggestion that we should create a Coalition Committee of equal numbers from each side that would be the ultimate arbiter, thereby depriving the Conservative side of the opportunity to dominate and

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depriving the Liberal Democrat side of the opportunity to be resentful about the Conservative side dominating. So that worked very well.

And then, as often happens when you get into a discussion and you're making progress, it occurred to us more or less simultaneously that if you were doing that it would make sense in the context of the UK government's committee structures to arrange for the chairman and deputy chairman of each Cabinet Committee to come from the opposing parties. One way round or the other – so Nick Clegg ended up running the Home Affairs Committee but it had a deputy chairman from the Conservative side, if I remember it was Ken Clarke. The rule that we developed was that it would be impossible for the majority or the chair to railroad things through a Cabinet Committee, because the deputy chair would always have the ability, or if it was the minority party that held the chair, the chair would always have the ability, to put up a flag and say 'I don't want this to be discussed any more here, it's to be remitted to the Coalition Committee which has equal numbers'. So there could never be an out-voting by one side of the other side. The result of that, of course, was that the Coalition Committee hardly ever met, because nobody wanted to trigger it. I may have this wrong, but I think we met on three occasions or something like that.

We did then develop a whole series of informal arrangements for discussion: the famous quad which for various purposes like budgets was genuinely a quad, and for other purposes was sort of a sextet with David Laws and myself attending it. There was the continuous, running negotiation between me and Danny which was semi-formalised and at a later stage also between me and David Laws, and then there were endless bilaterals between David and Nick. So at various levels there was a lot of informal discussion that went on and I think it wouldn't have been possible to run the coalition effectively just through the committee structure. You needed many more opportunities than that to have much smaller groups of people teasing things out and getting things straight and indeed I talked for several hours each week to Danny and to David on that basis. But I think the committee structure combined with the Programme for Government did provide a framework within which those detailed and ad hoc discussions could always be set.

Jill Rutter (JR): There seemed to be one or two false starts on the structure of Number 10 and the Policy Unit in Number 10, how that adapted to the coalition. With your prior experience in Number 10 under clearly a quite dominant Conservative government, I wondered whether you had any reflections on how Number 10 functioned and how you got to the right structures?

OL: Yes, this is something I have written about in some detail. It was one feature which we definitely got wrong in the beginning. In the first flush of enthusiasm for the coalition we thought we could run a sort of joint policy unit. I think it became pretty clear very early, I mean within a few months, that this was very difficult to do because there were two masters. In practice, I think, in a slightly unsatisfactory way, it reverted to being the Prime Minister's Policy Unit because there was really no way it could serve two masters. That left Nick feeling, quite reasonably, that he hadn't really got a Policy Unit advising him. But in the meanwhile it had the disadvantage that I think David felt that it wasn't really quite 'his' Policy Unit; he didn't know how much of what it was doing was moving across the fence. The people in it who were talented and effective, individually, were rendered collectively much less valuable because they were being pulled around and somewhat mistrusted by everybody, through no fault of their own. So it took us some while to reorganise that. By the last two years it was in much better shape. Jo Johnson [MP] by that stage was running a traditional Prime Minister's Policy Unit for the Prime Minister, very much Conservative, and Nick had a whole collection of special advisers [spads], very much Liberal Democrat, and of course by that stage they were all very involved in respective development of programmes for the 2015 Parliament and manifestos linked to those, so it went back to type. There was an interesting effort in the middle, particularly sponsored by Jeremy Heywood [Cabinet Secretary] to try to overcome the problem by having a set of civil servants forming the Policy Unit. That didn't work either because it wasn't actually the people, or the fact that they were spads that was the

problem in the first place, it was the fact you couldn't have a Policy Unit that served two sets of people and so the civil servants also found it was, practically speaking, impossible.

It's interesting to reflect on why that same problem didn't arise nearly so strongly in the departments, almost all of which had mixtures of two kinds of minister. I think the reason was that, if we leave aside the Treasury for a minute, in departments – and I think this is a problem about our system – departmental civil servants in my experience don't really pay any attention to anyone except the secretary of state. They are totally, focused on the secretary of state and in fact legally speaking, I suppose the rest of the ministers don't exist. If there's a junior minister that matters, the junior minister matters because the junior minister has the confidence of the secretary of state.

There is an exception in the case of the Treasury, or certainly was an exception in the case of the Treasury in coalition, which arose because first of all the Chief Secretary is somewhat more than most junior ministers, probably than any. But in addition, Danny Alexander was more than most chief secretaries, probably any. So in the Treasury I think there were two masters and that did cause some difficulties, actually, from time to time. But the relationships were so good that it was overcome.

By and large, the crunch issues that arose on a daily, weekly, monthly or annual basis between the two parties were not ones which had to do with the day-to-day running of the Treasury. In fact, there was a very great similarity of view about how to do that between George and Danny. So I think by accident it worked OK in the Treasury. It worked because of the structure of things in other departments, but it didn't work at the centre because the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister were both very important and they didn't see eye to eye on everything, inevitably, and they both needed help in sorting things out before they talked to one another and sorted out between them what to do. And they weren't really getting that until the end.

NH: What else surprised you about government? I mean particularly comparing between when you were in the Policy Unit in the '80s and coming in in 2010 - what did you observe about what had changed?

OL: Well I mean obviously the whole scene was totally different, because in the '80s we were driving through a very highly ideologically charged and dramatically radical programme under the auspices of a very dominant Prime Minister. The whole central machine was there to try and drive this through against enormous obstacles, within the government, outside government – the unions and nationalised industry; there were machine guns surrounding us. And Mrs Thatcher was by temperament and inclination a machine gun runner! So this was a very combative government, whereas the coalition of course was in a very, very different position.

It had one striking similarity which was the economic and fiscal challenge. In some ways in fact I think we faced a worse situation in the country, but we were doing so in a much more irenic spirit and there was much more ideological agreement in Britain in 2010 than there was in 1979, or indeed ironically, than there is now. It was a time when basically all three major parties were pretty similar to one another in their general view of life and if you just removed Brown's economic lunacies, actually the Labour government had been doing things that were not that different from the kinds of things we wanted to do. In many cases we were developing to their logical conclusion things that had been started on schools or trying to restructure the welfare system so there were no unemployment traps. There were all sorts of things we were trying to do that were widely accepted and it was not a great caesura in British political history. So that was very, very different.

I think something else that happened which is nothing to do with 'the Government', but has to do with government with a small 'g', is that the Civil Service had changed quite a lot. Generally for the worse. And that I think was a considerable worry to me all the way through my six years in government in a sense that in the late '70s there were, as there always will be in a vast bureaucracy, all sorts of

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problems and gaps and difficulties. But you could more or less rely on it that not only the most senior but also actually the most significant of the junior civil servants – so a bright, principal or assistant secretary – in the early '80s you could assume would be able to think more or less straight and would speak and write recognisably in English. They would know the difference between something which was being said that had evidence behind it, and something being said which was an attempt to disguise the fact someone hadn't got the slightest clue what they were talking about. By the time I came back, it was a big shock actually. We never quite pinned down the proportions but we did have little discs, green, yellow and red, that we put into bottles to try and measure the proportions; but very roughly speaking, a third-ish, sometimes up to a half of the papers that came in, especially latterly, were green, they were OK. A number were yellow and I'm afraid quite a lot were red -- no good at all.

NH: Is this cutting across all departments or the Cabinet Office specifically?

OL: Oh no, not Cabinet Office. Cabinet Office and the Treasury were significantly better than the average. But there was a huge amount of terrible guff, at huge, colossal, humungous length coming from some Departments. So I think one of the main things I achieved, actually, in the first year or two was just to send so many things back and ask for them to be one quarter of the length so as to reduce the output. I think that was one important achievement nobody ever noticed, but we really did significantly diminish the length of these things. It was absolutely extraordinary, because the first time I did this there was shock at the idea and I think disbelief that anyone could possibly produce the same paper at one quarter of the length. It came back a few days later one quarter of the length, with of course nothing important lost. In fact, it was still twice or three times too long.

Somewhere along the line the Civil Service had got used to splurge of the meaningless kind. Some of this didn't matter; it was just very inelegant and very impenetrable, but it didn't actually have any substantive effect. Quite a lot I discovered quite quickly did really matter, in the sense that people just didn't know what they were talking about so they were saying that things were impossible which were in fact perfectly possible, or saying that things were possible that were in fact quite impossible, or saying things which were just literally not the case. Because they hadn't found out. Instead of finding out, they were splurging. I remained throughout the six years very worried about this. We did make efforts to improve it. I think we certainly cut down the volume, we cut out a lot of production as well. There were enormous numbers of pieces of paper being produced; we cut that down; that was certainly beneficial. But when it came to the serious work of trying to get things implemented or trying to discover where something's going wrong and putting it right, I very often found, even at the very end, that the small team in the Implementation Unit who were very clear-minded – and we hired people who were specifically very clear-minded – could do more in a few weeks than a whole Department had done in a year to get straight why something was going wrong. The sheer analytical incisiveness which I had more or less been able to rely on in the Policy Unit in the '80s had not disappeared, it was still present and there were people who were supreme examples of it, but there was very much less of it around. I don't know whether that's because that's happened in Britain altogether or whether it's happened to the Civil Service specifically. I didn't get that impression in the commercial world or the financial world. I don't know quite what went wrong in the civil service. Chris Wormald [Permanent Secretary & Head of Policy Profession] and I both tried very hard to nurture the idea of a 'policy profession' and to get over this.

I have a horrible feeling that bringing in [Derek] Rayner [as government adviser] and all that in the '80s may have started the rot. There was an awful lot of management speak. Underneath all this, I worry too that there was something else going on which is that an awful lot of the time of the civil servants, I fear, even now, and certainly in 2010 was taken up with leadership seminars and faded parodies of serious efforts to manage people. In the Armed Forces, where they do actually take management and leadership of people really seriously, you've got to because otherwise they're all dead, they do of course have team building things, but then it's serious team building. In the Civil Service it was a sort of parody of that and I had the sense that people were rising through the ranks because of their ability to organise seminars and hold leadership courses and speak this gobbledygook and that really worried me. My sense was the

government in 2010 was less good at getting down to nuts and bolts and finding out why things weren't working and putting them right, than it was in the '80s, which is a distressing fact.

JR: So one of the early moves was to get rid of what was then called the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit which I think was sitting in the Treasury. That was resurrected in a new guise as the Implementation Unit and given your frustrations at the ability to implement I wondered if you wanted to talk about that?

OL: Yes, I have thought about that, again I have written about that. The Delivery Unit came in to give me an explanation of what it did and I had a small fit. But I made a terrible mistake which I suppose Danny and I jointly made, although looking back on it I think he was the wiser of the two of us. I thought that the solution to the problem was to get rid of the Delivery Unit. Whereas I now think the solution to the problem would have been to have reformed the Delivery Unit, which essentially is what we did eventually do because we ended up with an Implementation Unit which did the best things that the Delivery Unit had been doing and not the worst things. But it took some while to realise that. I don't know, but I guess that the Delivery Unit had been borne out of similar frustrations on the part of Labour ministers. But at some point or other it got captured by a certain view of how you manage things. It was appalling when they came to see me, from my point of view, because they really were suggesting that all problems in society could be resolved by moving in and pulling levers, which I don't believe. But we threw the baby out with the bathwater because I think they were also trying to find out, for example, why there were rough sleepers and working out what you could do about it, which is a jolly good thing to do. So we did work our way back to a sensible solution through the creation of the Implementation Unit. And incidentally the proliferation of implementation units in departments is a huge step forward, partly because it is actually necessary to get some data and find out what exactly is going on. That's always a useful thing to do. In addition, paying more attention to the facts does help to counteract the culture of garbage-speak. Facts are very, very useful in government. They should be at a premium.

NH: What was your sense though of how departments reacted to having a central unit like the Implementation Unit? I suppose you'll know one of the familiar refrains in departments about the centre is 'We want to be left to get on with it'?

OL: Yes. I don't know what departmental officials thought, they were too polite to tell me but maybe there were huge ructions. My colleagues actually gave every appearance of being very grateful -- on the whole, indeed almost universally. They mainly set up their own units, to whom we seconded people whom we nurtured and with whom we worked in perfect amity. I spent a lot of my time in government sitting with colleagues trying to solve things and sitting with officials from departments trying to solve things. I mean I didn't see it as our role to tell departments what to do because they were getting on with the programme, that wasn't the challenge. The challenge was that sometimes they were trying to do it and nothing was happening at the other end, or not what they'd expected. Or there could just be problems conducting business as usual. When we had problems with the Passport Agency, say, that was not because there was some policy that was askew; it was because the Agency had got behind-hand in processing passports -- rather a mundane problem. A lot of stuff was like that. I didn't get any sense of resistance. As I say, on the whole, almost universally, it was welcomed that there was somebody who was trying to find out why the minister was getting a whole heap of ordure thrown at them about something and who was trying to do something to help solve the problem.

NH: Just before we move on to some more of the things that you did in government, obviously this project is about ministerial effectiveness and I'd be interested in your reflections on that. I saw that you'd, in opposition, said something about putting secretaries of state on contracts and they'd have to deliver certain things. Looking back now what do you think, from your colleagues and from your own experience, makes an effective minister?

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OL: Well I think the problem is that it's an impossible job; this is supremely true of prime ministers but it's true of every minister. Because in order to be a perfect minister you'd have to have an array of skills which no human being can combine. Ministers have to be very good performers in Parliament, they have to be good on the box and on the radio, they have to deal with constituents, they have to find ways of dealing with lobby groups and interest groups, they have to run a department, they have to participate in collegiate discussion and carry the day and you know, it's impossible for anyone to be an expert in all of these in every respect. And good ministers can be good ministers in many different ways. Some ministers are good at some parts of it and not other parts of it, some are good all round. But no one can be a perfect minister in any government and I don't think there's a sort of recipe book for being a good one.

NH: You'd obviously been in government before and been around politics quite a bit, when you came in as a minister was there, what were some of the things that you tried to do? Was there anyone that you'd seen as a role model maybe?

OL: Well, no I wasn't doing anything specific at all. So I was in a very odd position.

NH: It was an unusual role.

OL: Yes, yes. I was somewhere between a political version of a Cabinet Secretary, a special adviser and a Mr Fix It. So my role was bizarre.

JR: Did you see yourself as a sort of Lord Whitelaw, updated?

OL: Oh no. Willy was a great figure, he was ancient and grand. No, there wasn't really anyone else who had been doing what I was doing.

JR: Tony Blair, I think, had Jack Cunningham who was called 'The Enforcer' or something like that?

OL: Yes and I don't know exactly what Jack did at that stage. But I certainly wasn't aware of any role model. Indeed, I wasn't aware of any job description and in fact I didn't really have any very clear mandate, at all. I regarded it as my job just to make sure that so far as possible, the show stayed on the road. Whatever it was that David Cameron wanted done on Wednesday, I tried to do. And then I moved on to Thursday.

JR: It's very interesting, because this is a role that's not really existed before and it doesn't really exist now, I just wondered whether you thought it was an essential piece of government machinery? Whether you'd actually advise prime ministers to have somebody to have that role, a politician to do it as opposed to just the Cabinet Secretary?

OL: I certainly don't think it's essential in any way. Everybody has their own style. Besides which there's a difference between coalition governments and majority governments. During coalition I was fulfilling another role which was just continuous discussion to try to make sure that things didn't blow up and I think somebody would have needed to do that, but it could have been all sorts of people. Indeed it was being done all the time by David and Nick, by George and Danny as well as Ed Llewellyn [Chief of Staff to David Cameron] and Jonny Oates [Chief of Staff to Nick Clegg]. So there were several of us engaged in that. But no, no I don't think it's in any way essential to have a senior minister doing what I was doing in a majority administration; it just depends on the prime minister of the day and how they operate and who they get to do what.

Also I think it depends quite a lot on particular personal relationships. I mean, I could not have done what I was doing if I hadn't spent all that time with David from the first moment, well before he was leader, and if George and David and I hadn't worked intensively over five years with Steve and Ed and

Kate and others to create the programme in the first place, and if I hadn't been seeing them every day (usually more than once a day) and texting and emailing.

I would have been completely useless if I'd been 'a minister' sitting in a box somewhere. I wouldn't have had the slightest impact. Nobody was in any way interested in what I thought about things; they paid attention to what I was doing only because they knew that I was doing it because the PM wanted it done.

JR: I wondered if you might talk to us a bit about how you thought things like your private office functioned, the sort of day-to-day business of being a minister and all those support functions within the Cabinet Office that you drew on. What made them work, what didn't work so well?

OL: I was very, very lucky in that I had a succession of absolutely terrific people in the private office, who were colossally enthusiastic and energetic and hardworking and effective. I don't know how they survived actually because the workload was pretty intense. That was actually, from my point of view, a very important thing. Much more important probably than for anyone other than the Prime Minister (and the Deputy Prime Minister in the coalition) because a normal secretary of state has a department -- which I didn't. So the private office was effectively acting as a department of state. It would also have been impossible to do what I was doing had I not had the Implementation Unit and the Policy Unit working with me. That became truer and truer of the Policy Unit; when we were developing the 2015 manifesto for example it was done entirely through the Policy Unit. It became truer and truer in government through the Implementation Unit. I think that became more and more important and the lack of what had been the Delivery Unit's proper roles became more evident as we passed beyond the stage where we were legislating and into the stage where we were facing real life issues about how the legislation translated into action.

I also had two great pieces of luck, one of which was Jeremy Heywood – who is totally brilliant – and the other of which was a succession of first-rate National Security Advisers in the Cabinet Office. Working with Jeremy and with Peter Ricketts, Kim Darroch and Mark Lyall Grant, it was possible to get things to happen in a way that otherwise wouldn't have been possible.

My experience was that however much we did from private office to private office, and from me direct to Cabinet colleagues, and indeed directly with departmental officials, unless they were getting the same signals from the Cabinet Secretary and where appropriate from the National Security Adviser, it just wouldn't have happened. So that relationship was I think enormously important and I was very, very lucky. From my point of view, the relationship with the Number 10 private office was also crucial, for exactly the same reason. Again, I mean Ed Llewellyn and Kate Fall [the PM's advisers] of course had been part of the gang that had developed our programme and so we were all friends. The Number 10 private office as always is staffed by tip top people and was working, obviously, completely with the Prime Minister's agenda as it always does, and the result was that it and I were always aligned. I think that even that might not have been enough had it not been for the very close relationship I had with George, and during coalition with Danny too. So what made it possible to get things to happen was that I knew that via the various elements of the centre it was possible to line things up. The departments were getting from the Treasury, both Chancellor and Chief Secretary, from the Cabinet Secretary, from the National Security Adviser, from my private office, from David's private office, the same message. And there were countless occasions on which we needed to use all of that to move things which would otherwise have been blocked.

JR: I'm very intrigued because there's this network of quite complex relationships with people in that period and we got a period under David Cameron and George Osborne of extreme alignment between the Treasury and Number 10 that I think is almost unprecedented. Do you think there's a centre that seems quite functional and is organised well enough to be resilient if you don't have all those relationships really clicking in?

OL: Well I think again you can run things in lots of different ways. I mean, of course I didn't see the Blair/Brown years so I have no way of telling what, how they worked. And I can't see it first-hand now and I didn't see it first-hand under Major, so the only other experience I have is under Mrs T and there it was completely different. She was at war with the Treasury half the time and she was at war with her ministers the rest of the time. She liked being at war; she was warlike, and in its own way that was also highly functional. So I don't think there is a rule that you've got to do it one way or the other. It was certainly a great deal calmer in our time than it was under Mrs T and to read the accounts, it appears to have been a great deal calmer than it was under Blair/Brown. The calmness is a virtue if like me you like leading a pleasant life, but it doesn't make much difference to the end result, because you can get the end result through great friction or great calmness, I think.

JR: It seems that rather interestingly it becomes less calm after you get a Conservative majority in the 2015 election, move into single-party government. I just wondered if you might talk about how different that was and what changed in the run up to the referendum?

OL: It was calm. I think that's a very good example because actually when you look back on it, what is truly remarkable is that when there were such strongly divided opinions about what was after all a very major issue, within a single party which had after all caused huge, almost unbridgeable rifts and gulfs in the past, I think it's pretty remarkable that although the referendum was hard fought on both sides, actually there was no disruption to ordinary government business at all. The ordinary process of government went on in a perfectly orderly way. Literally until we were in the last two or three weeks, I mean really right at the end, when obviously it was like a general election. Actually you can see that in another way which is that at the end of it all, with this shock result and the resignation of a prime minister – you can hardly imagine more traumatic circumstances – actually it all settled down perfectly happily again. So no, I don't think it was not calm post-2015 at all; it was very calm.

It was actually easier of course to run a majority administration than it was a coalition one because we didn't need to have the same level of continuous discussion. It was also easier in that, this sounds an amusing reflection from where we are now, but by 2015 it looked as if a huge proportion of the most difficult work had been done. The fiscal accounts were coming into good shape, the main lines of policy were already laid down legislatively, there wasn't too much to do by way of new legislation - it was largely an implementation challenge and there was every prospect that two or three years later there would be money to ease things, which we hadn't ever had. I mean we were terribly short of cash all the way through '10 to '15. Now as I say, that all looks like a very ironic set of statements from the perspective we see things from now, but in that year '15/'16 the machine was pretty much on an even keel I think.

JR: So the big, new innovation then were these sets of implementation task forces. I think you were on really quite a lot of them. I wonder if you might talk about how you saw those working?

OL: Jeremy and I invented this idea. In coalition the main issues were about differences of view being resolved in an orderly and amicable way. That was clearly what we most needed to be able to do. And for that purpose Cabinet Committees were very, very useful things because you could have the formal debates and you could also have informal discussions outside them and then they'd crystallise in the formal debates, and the structures we've already talked about helped. Once you move into a majority administration with a very clear programme, most of which was in media res already, there didn't seem much point in having prolonged policy discussions, because we perfectly well knew what our policies were -- except in the National Security Council [NSC], where obviously we had to respond to changing scenes. But in the whole domestic agenda, it was pretty clear what we were trying to do. And indeed, George and I each had the view that in his case the Economic Affairs Committee and in my case the Home Affairs Committee were simply useful as clearing houses for papers, enabling officials and ministers to make regular agreements where there were mild differences between departments. But I

never called a meeting of the Home Affairs Committee and he never called a meeting of the Economic Affairs Committee; the last thing we wanted to do was have a meeting because we had quite enough meetings. And we knew what we were trying to do. Whereas Nick had had lots of meetings with the Home Affairs Committee and there had to be meetings with the Economic Affairs Committee to settle genuine policy issues inside the coalition. So this left free time to focus on implementation in the Conservative-only administration and Jeremy and I had both spotted that there was a problem about Cabinet Committees when you come to implementation. They're great for resolving policy differences, if you get them right. But they're really not very good at trying to find out what's happening on the ground and trying to put it right if it isn't what it should be. In fact, no use at all. Partly because the people that need to be there aren't there unless you have a secretary of state who's so knowledgeable about their own department after years of running it that they are in effect also the permanent secretary. But it's rare.

Also actually, this point I was making earlier about the facts being at a premium is never truer than in Cabinet Committees. I mean the number of people that come to Cabinet Committees with all the relevant facts on a sheet in front of them is, in my experience, very limited. So our idea was: let's have some groups that are focused on trying to get X or Y or Z to happen, where we're quite clear what it is we want to happen but not at all clear (a) whether it is happening and b) if it isn't why it isn't, or (c) once we have discovered why it isn't, what to do about it. And let's get them serviced by the Implementation Unit and its satellite Implementation Units in other departments, so we can make sure that this is a data-rich environment where if we're talking about housing we start by actually having in front of us the facts: how many houses got built last year, how many planning permissions were there and how long is the gap between the time when you get a planning permission and the time that the house is built, what are the conditions that are attached by local authorities which prevent the houses being built once the planning permission is there and what can you do about it -- and all sorts of nitty gritty detail, boring but incredibly important issues like that. I say boring -- boring if you're not interested in them and fascinating for those of us that are interested in administration! So a group of people who come from relevant departments, each of whom have the same agenda because it's laid down already as a governmental agenda, some of whom are officials, some of whom are ministers, sitting in a data rich environment where the data are provided on a transparent basis by the Implementation Unit -- and where the whole group are crunching through nitty gritty questions like 'How do you make sure that the childcare system actually has enough childcare providers of the required quality to provide 30 hours free childcare a week?' or 'How do you make sure that the apprenticeship levy actually works so that the right employers pay the right amount and there are the right number of apprentices and they get the right training in the right places?' and so on.

We thought that that would enable us to overcome quite a lot of the problems of departmental coordination, so we particularly chose to have these task forces where a policy thrust involved more than one department. In fact, it turned out only really to work when that was the case and it didn't even then work everywhere because it also depended on, inevitably, who was chairing it and who were the other participants and how willing were the officials to participate in an active way rather than being polite. And also the level of information and so on. So I'm not going to sit here and pretend that task forces are the solution to everything; they aren't. If they're good, they can be very good. I think we were able to get them to do things which otherwise it would have been difficult to do. I learnt something else on the way, which I hadn't expected when we originally agreed with David and George to set them up, which is that they provided a focal point which enabled me to get people to attend to questions in advance of the meetings, that otherwise it would have been difficult to get them to focus on. One example is computer systems sitting in two or three different departments which somehow had to be melded together, which as you will know is one of the recurrent nightmares: different sets of officials working on different computer programmes and another set of officials in each department working on policy, which I think is a nightmare world. It was evident to all the ministers that were about to be at the meeting of the taskforce that this was going to be a car crash, because you could just see that these things would not knit together. But the fact that there was about to be a meeting, and that this was going to come out, enabled

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me before the meetings to hold pre-meetings typically with the relevant junior ministers, the relevant directors-general and directors from the various departments and point out to them: 'We're going to be meeting on Thursday and somebody's going to say "Hold on a moment; if this bit of data's being thrown up by this computer and that bit by this computer and if there's no official that's trying to knit them together we got a problem here", so what are we going to do about it?' Not always but typically, this engendered a spirit of cooperative solution-making that meant that by the time we got to the meeting, or at least the meeting after, there was actually a solution in sight. I don't think we would have ever have got that by having grand papers at Cabinet Committees. Because the secretaries of state who had many things on their plates would never have got into the sort of nitty gritty details of the computer systems and the officials who knew about them wouldn't have been present and the papers would have been meaningless.

JR: I'm intrigued as to whether when some of the initial policy decisions were made, either in earlier Cabinet Committees or for the manifesto, whether actually having some of these implementation considerations at the table would have meant that the policy might have been slightly different?

OL: Well, this is a recurrent theme, isn't it? I have finished one book and I've embarked on two others, so I won't get to this for a while, but I do intend to write a fourth book to try and dispel mythologies about, as I see it, bureaucracy and policy making and administration, not just here but around the world. I think the idea that any set of politicians, anywhere in the world – it doesn't matter for this purpose whether they're the Chinese Communist party or a group of British democrats so to speak – is ever going to receive some sort of nicely packaged, well-coordinated advice about the implementability of a policy they haven't yet thought of is a simply crazy idea that's been invented by political and organisational theorists totally disconnected from the real world. What actually happens in policy making is you've got a thousand different considerations about everything, you're trying to peer through the mists of sociological phenomena, economic phenomena, political phenomena, and you're trying to get a sense of what strategically might really matter.

Let's take the case of childcare. You come up with the idea that one of the things about our society at the moment that is impeding both the wellbeing of our population and our economic performance is that not enough women have enough time to develop their careers properly to participate at a high level in the workforce. This is depriving us of a large amount of productivity and it's also making life miserable for the women in question. So this is a felt need which happens to be politically and economically salient. Now what do you do about this? Well, you then engage in a whole heap of discussion about whether there's any money to do anything or whether you're going to have to do it for free. Eventually somehow or other, out of the huge molten pot of the autumn statements and the budgets and so on, you get to the point that the Chancellor of the Exchequer says 'OK, I can find X billion pounds to increase the amount of free childcare'. Now this is a breakthrough moment because you've been wanting to do something about this for five or six years. Are you then going to sit down and say 'Hold on, no, no George don't put this in the Autumn Statement, let me just go off and collect a group of officials to think about whether as a matter of fact if we were to do this, it would be possible to do it'. Of course this is not the way life works. You make a decision that you're going to have free childcare for a lot of people and you're going to be willing to spend up to X on it and that's the moment at which the official machine starts cranking into action and starts thinking about how the hell to do it. I think that's just inevitable. I don't think there's any way you could ever undo that. Otherwise you could have the official machine desperately trying to work out how to implement a whole series of things that we're never going to have. They'd be chasing their tails the whole time.

So I think it's inevitable that you're going to end up with, if you're lucky, a clear view of what ministers are trying to achieve. That I think is owed to the system -- though, as we all know, it is not always the case in any administration. But if you get a clear idea - and the 30 hours' free childcare for all people is a pretty clear idea, it's a fairly simple statement in itself- then I think you've got to have some kind of

mechanics that enable you to make sure that the things which are being developed to make this possible in various ministries are knit together. That is a genuinely difficult proposition and one which we're in the infancy of cracking, actually. I think it's got worse over the past 50 years in the sense that 50 years ago there was so little that you could do electronically, and so slow were the methods of delivery that simplicity was an absolute necessity. I mean, if you look at the way that the ration cards in the '30s, '40s and '50s were developed, it is incredibly simple and the reason was that they had card indices and they didn't have any computers. It wasn't difficult to envisage and it was possible for a minister, even a not particularly intelligent minister, roughly speaking to know how it was going to work. He or she could go into a room and see people sitting at desks filling out ration cards and handing them out. It was very straightforward. Nowadays you have this horrible fact that the whole thing is immensely complicated. The expectations of the speed with which things will be developed and delivered, and the accuracy with which they will be delivered is much greater and the result of that is that experts get into the business and ministers lose track of what is actually happening. I think most of the disasters are not because the IT specialists or the bridge builders have got it wrong, I think it's mostly where long back in the process ministers in some administration, maybe long-passed, lost track of what was actually happening and the people who are doing the thing have no idea of what it is that the original minister was trying to do. Chinese whispers set in. Un-Chinese-whispering government is, I think, crucial.

NH: That sounds like the title of one of our next reports – ‘Un-Chinese Whispering Government’! You mentioned a few of the reforms that you enacted, which of those do you think worked the best and is there anything else that you would do in the future to try and make government more effective?

OL: Most of my effort of course was not directed to the process of government but to the achievement of real world success. I don't think that any of the things that we did to the mechanics are permanent acquisitions of any kind. Theresa has a completely different challenge from the one we faced, in the sense that there are now again huge, mega, policy decisions to be made. And she's accommodated that as I understand it from everything I've heard from colleagues who are in government and everything I read in newspapers and stuff, by revivifying Cabinet Committees as places for discussion, which I think is entirely appropriate. Of course it's not between bits of the coalition but it's between ministers where they haven't got a settled policy, because she inherited the task of Brexit at a time where there was no settled policy and still isn't and it will have to change as we go along for some years. So in one sense there's a shift back to a mode which was appropriate in coalition and is appropriate again for different reasons now. It's quite interesting to notice that even though she's done that, she's actually maintained not all by any means but some of the task forces which suggests to me that maybe that's being absorbed as a mechanism that will last. It's too early to tell.

JR: She's actually chairing quite a few of them, isn't she?

OL: Yes, but that's of course a matter of the particular style of a particular prime minister; whether they're chaired by the prime minister or by somebody else will vary with regime. But the idea of mixing officials and ministers into the meeting in which you're trying to sort out what to do about something where there is a central policy, is I think quite a productive idea and I suspect may last – we'll see. I think we were already doing that actually in the National Security Council from the beginning. I think the most useful innovation in process terms probably was the NSC which was really Pauline Neville-Jones' idea originally, in around 2006. As part of our policy review then, she developed that and I think it did prove very valuable. Having the data in the sense of the maps and the facts in front of us and having the heads of the agencies and the head of the Armed Forces and the head of the Foreign Office and so on, and indeed typically the relevant ambassadors and relevant officials from the Ministry of Defence or whatever, present so that we were engaged in discussion that was not just politicians wittering but was interacting between operational people and politicians and making decisions. That, I think is really quite a powerful shift. It's different from the task forces because the task forces were not making decisions. I mean, not except at the very operational level; the taskforces were really about sorting things out – they

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were specifically not Cabinet Committees; they were not empowered to make policy. The NSC was a hybrid and so especially powerful and of course chaired by the Prime Minister, essentially with the more important people in Cabinet in it. So I think that was probably the most productive, long term shift. I would be very surprised if that disappeared.

NH: At this point in the interview we usually ask people what their advice would be for a new minister coming into government. I'm interested in your advice on that but in particular for you as well, what would your advice be to a new Prime Minister having seen things from the centre?

OL: I don't really have any advice. I think, you know, there isn't a cook book. Each minister, each prime minister just has to find their own way of doing whatever it is that their particular job is. My sense is that what really matters about a government is whether it has a clear sense of purpose and whether it has the mechanisms to be flexible in pursuing that purpose. There are a thousand different ways you can do so, but I don't think any of them are intrinsically better than any others, it will depend on circumstance and people and so on. I think where things go wrong, fundamentally, is where there isn't a unity of purpose, or where there is a unity of purpose but no degree of flexibility. It's that combination of roughly speaking knowing where you're going and having done enough thinking through of it to begin with so that it does cohere roughly, but then recognising that the world is never quite as easy and neat as you hoped it would be, and that it changes under you and therefore you need the ability to adjust. Big problems that have come about in administration I think have typically come about either because a government just soldiers on when it needed to adjust or vacillates because it doesn't know what it's trying to achieve any longer.

I think very typically the second problem of not knowing what you'd like to achieve occurs when a government's been in power for too long -- because it's much more difficult to formulate genuinely new policy lines (I don't mean little things but big things) from government than it is in opposition. The inability to weave and duck with reality probably also comes about typically when governments have been going on too long and have got stuck in a rut. We never had the chance, we had one government for five years and another one for one. But perhaps that's why it all felt so happy, if you see what I mean? It might have felt somewhat different some years later.

JR: You very briefly had two weeks as Head of the Brexit Unit. I was just thinking from your perspective, having seen the Cabinet Office and Civil Service and the Implementation Unit in Brexit is this big, not exactly out of the blue but not on the planning horizon necessarily, challenge, what your reflections would be about how well placed government machinery and the Civil Service is to rise to the challenge of whatever sort of Brexit we're going to see?

OL: I lasted one day longer than Diane James did as leader of UKIP. I don't share the apparently widespread view that the machine is particularly challenged by this. There are all sorts of difficulties about the Civil Service that I've alluded to but there are also very large numbers of very talented people and I think one of the things the civil service is actually very good at, is adapting itself to quite fundamental changes. It does that pretty smoothly every time there's a change of government, which this is in effect - although it's the same government in one sense it's another government in another sense and it's got a different task on its hands.

Secondly, this activity is so central to the future of our country that the very best, most senior people have been drafted in – I was personally partially responsible for pushing the appointment of Olly Robbins and I don't think you can do better, I think Jeremy Heywood and he will be able to make a huge success of organising officialdom to support the task. I don't think that's the problem. No I think the problem here is that there are some genuinely difficult, real world issues. I don't personally believe that they're anything like as complicated as a lot of people have said they were, nor do I think it's anything like as indistinct as where the thing is headed as some people think it is. I think it's pretty clear. But I think there are going to be some real difficulties in negotiation and some real difficulties of selling the results of negotiation to the public. Those two things fall to the politicians and not to the

administration, and the number of people involved is tiny. Essentially there are 27 heads of government and a Commissioner and a negotiator for the European Parliament and Theresa May. That's really about it actually. So I don't think there's any lack of people or skill or knowledge to support the Prime Minister in this. But I think there is a very considerable diplomatic and political challenge -- probably the most significant diplomatic and political challenge the country has faced in modern times. I think we're perfectly well equipped to meet it; whether we will do so successfully remains to be seen.

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