

# Ministers Reflect

## David Jones



18 January 2018

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

2005–present: Member of Parliament for Clwyd West

## Government career

2016–17: Minister of State (Department for Exiting the European Union)

2012–14: Secretary of State for Wales

2010–12: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales

2006–10: Shadow Minister for Wales

## **David Jones was interviewed by Daniel Thornton and Lewis Lloyd on 18 January 2018 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.**

David Jones reflects on his year as a minister in the new Department for Exiting the EU. He discusses the lack of preparation for a Leave vote, the evolution of Government’s position on Ireland, and the “posturing” of the devolved administrations.

David Jones was also interviewed for Ministers Reflect in 2015, after leaving the Wales Office. [Read this interview from page 14.](#)

**Daniel Thornton (DT):** Perhaps we could start with how you came to come back into government in the Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU) after having had a stint out of government?

**David Jones (DJ):** Well, I supported the Prime Minister when she was seeking leadership of the Conservative Party. I think I was one of the first MPs to declare for her. I thought she'd be an excellent leader, which is why I did that. And of course, she was successful – in fact without a ballot, as you know.

I then had a telephone call from the Prime Minister, one Saturday afternoon when I was walking my dog, offering me the job, which I was delighted to have.

**DT: Did you start immediately?**

**DJ:** Yes. I had a phone call the same day from the Private Office at the new department. That was the first time I heard the acronym DExEU. I was told it was the Department for Exiting the European Union, although I was told by the Private Secretary that it was to be known as DExEU.

I had the usual first conversation, within a matter of hours I guess of being offered the job by the Prime Minister. I started immediately the following Monday. Very shortly after that, I was actually finding myself going to Bratislava to a council [of EU ministers]. So it was a very swift process, but it was not something that I was unused to, having already been a minister.

**DT: Where were you located?**

**DJ:** In 9 Downing Street. At that stage it was a brand new department, we had relatively few officials, and I was given a room overlooking Whitehall. I was introduced pretty quickly to my Private Office, who I found very impressive, and found more impressive indeed as time went on – they were very high calibre. I met David Davis [Secretary of State for Exiting the EU] and Robin Walker, who was the other Commons Minister, and of course George Bridges, who was the Lords Minister. We went out to lunch, came back, and that afternoon we had a meeting with the staff in the department, which I think at that stage were fewer than 100. So it was a very small department.

We hit the ground running, it was a very swift process. There had already been a unit in the Cabinet Office that was dealing with this particular issue, and that formed the nucleus of the team of the new department. So they weren't starting entirely from scratch. Nevertheless, it's quite an exciting process, to be at the birth of a new department of state.

**DT: What were your initial tasks? You mentioned going to Bratislava.**

**DJ:** There were a lot of early meetings with officials. You will recall that there was criticism of the previous Prime Minister that no preparatory work had been done for a Leave vote, and I think that was justifiable criticism. When you have two potential outcomes to a process, you should be prepared for either. The fact is that little or no work had actually been done on this.

So there were a lot of meetings with officials early on, and I was quite impressed with the speed with which they had begun the process of scoping out the issues that we needed to address. There are a huge number of issues. A lot of them are legalistic, which I enjoyed because it was something that I had previous experience of, both professionally and in the Wales Office which was law heavy.

We then had to engage with the European Union. One of the first jobs I had was to attend the Informal Council in Bratislava, because Slovakia had just taken over the Presidency of the European Union. So I flew out to Bratislava and met a lot of very stunned EU foreign ministers, who were really astounded that the UK had decided to leave. Of course, I realised that it left them with a bit of a headache too. I was particularly surprised when I was introduced to a very senior European Commissioner in Bratislava, and his first words to me were, "How long does the UK intend to remain shackled to this corpse?", which was the most disconcerting introduction I think I've ever had. I think that summed up the surprise, anger and frankly confusion as to where we were. The confusion really was the main issue. They didn't know what we were going to do. A lot of them were still of the view that we wouldn't go ahead to leave the EU.

**DT: Presumably you told them that you thought that was incorrect?**

**DJ:** Well, I had a request very soon after I was appointed to meet a former Scandinavian Prime Minister. He met me in the Commons, and he said he was really grateful that I had agreed to meet him because he wanted reassurance as soon as possible that we would not actually be leaving the European Union. I assured him that we were leaving the European Union. He said, "But you don't have to. The referendum was just advisory, it wasn't binding, you don't have to do it." I said, "Well, that's the way it works in this country," and he said, "Why don't you simply have another referendum? Give people another chance to think about it." I said, "Well, it doesn't work that way." He was simply astounded that the UK was going. He couldn't believe that the British Government would regard themselves as bound by the referendum result. I think that said something pretty fundamental about the psyche there.

**DT: So other EU member states had trouble grappling with what had happened. What did you find inside Government? You mentioned the civil service were very quick to start mapping out the issues, but did you come across people who you thought weren't on side?**

**DJ:** No, not at all. I was hugely impressed by the professionalism of the civil service. I have said this previously, after I left the Wales Office. The civil service is one of the greatest national resources of this country. The sheer professionalism of the officials who were taking on the biggest challenge that this country has had since the Second World War, and being quite prepared to deal with it, was so impressive.

I remember speaking to a senior academic quite shortly after I was appointed, who said that he himself had been a supporter of Remain, but that the biggest reassurance he had was that the British civil service was dealing with the process. Because, he said, they will just do it. You ask them properly to do it, and they will do it. What they need is political direction and, provided they get that, they will do a wonderful job. They are doing a wonderful job now.

**DT: In terms of political direction, I suppose the first big statement about Brexit was the Party Conference speech in Birmingham in Autumn 2016. Do you remember the policy process leading to that speech? Was DExEU advising Number 10 and the Prime Minister on that?**

**DJ:** Oh yes, there was a constant flow of discussion between DExEU and Number 10. But the speech certainly was devised at Number 10. The Prime Minister made a number of extremely good speeches, and I think the best speeches she has made as Prime Minister have all been about Brexit. That was a memorable speech.

The subsequent speech she made in January last year at Lancaster House, was, I think, the best speech she's ever made. I attended that and it was attended by the diplomatic corps. I remember leaving that and hearing ambassadors saying that it was, firstly, a tremendously well-delivered speech, but secondly, a very helpful and reassuring speech, because it set out the British position with such accuracy and clarity. Then again, of course, the Florence speech was also good. But yes, the conference speech was the first political statement that came through about that.

**DT: So there was a process of thinking about what the priorities were and negotiations, red lines and so on. I guess the first big policy decision was the timing of Article 50 notification?**

**DJ:** Yes, that was the first task. Jeremy Corbyn pressed for us to trigger Article 50 immediately, which would have been disastrous and have led to utter chaos. As I said earlier, with no preparatory work worth talking about having been done by the Government prior to the referendum, we had to do an awful lot of work. First of all, in terms of policy, but secondly in terms of, if you like, PR. We had a business community that was also shocked and confused – I think they'd anticipated that there would be a Remain vote. So we had to start a process of discussion with all civil society, business

and commerce in this country. First of all, to ascertain what people's priorities were; secondly, to offer them reassurance that their concerns would be dealt with; and thirdly, we needed to make sure that our negotiating position was formed on the basis of that discussion.

A lot of the work that I did was having meetings with various interest groups, mostly from business. I paid several visits to the City and spoke to City groupings, and then you get people like farmers, fishermen and so on. And also a lot of discussions with other foreign ministers, who ultimately became less confused and wanted to talk to us.

So there was a lot of work to do. And I think, frankly, that Jeremy Corbyn's call for an immediate triggering of Article 50 was based upon his profound ignorance, and it really shocked me.

**DT: Do you think the Government was clear about what it wanted by the time Article 50 was triggered?**

**DJ:** Yes. That's not to say that further work wasn't required, but I think that we had decided what our position would be. The Lancaster House speech clarified that. That was the first occasion when the Prime Minister said explicitly that what she was seeking was a deep and special relationship with the EU which would be founded upon a free trade agreement. That had not been said explicitly before. So, by the time we triggered Article 50, we knew what we were heading for.

Of course, there were a lot of legal hurdles that we had to overcome. We had the Gina Miller case. Prior to that, the Government's position was that it was going to exercise its prerogative powers to trigger Article 50. I am bound to say this, speaking entirely personally, but I always thought that was bad policy. I felt that it was important that Parliament should have a say in the result, and ultimately it did.

In fact, we carried the day by a huge majority in Parliament. But it did look as if we were trying to be devious, when I don't think that we were. I think that it was genuinely thought that the prerogative powers would suffice, but everybody who I discussed it with felt that we really should get Parliament involved.

**DT: What was the policy process leading to the position that Parliament wasn't going to be involved and that was ultimately reversed?**

**DJ:** Well, it was, to an extent, *force majeure*, because the courts had ordered it.

**DT: The reversal was *force majeure*, but the position originally?**

**DJ:** That had been decided at a very early stage. It might even have been decided before I arrived at DExEU. It was always thought that the prerogative powers would suffice. But the Miller case made that impossible.

In fact, the Miller case was really quite helpful to us, because the judges made an awful lot of comments there which were quite helpful, and I think will probably obviate further litigation. So the ultimate position was forced upon us.

**DT: To what extent were Ireland and the Irish border a feature of the policy discussions at that stage?**

**DJ:** That was always regarded as an important issue, and again specifically referenced in the Lancaster House speech. The Irish issue was always regarded as a difficult one, and one that we had to resolve, obviously for the benefit of Northern Ireland but clearly for the benefit of the Republic too, with which we've got such a strong, special relationship. So that was recognised at a very early stage.

**DT: To what extent do you see an evolution between the position that there was in Lancaster House and eventually Florence, and then the position in December 2017?**

**DJ:** Things evolved because of events, which is the usual thing. Certainly the position over Ireland was refined. The departure of Enda Kenny and the arrival of Leo Varadkar [as Taoiseach] caused some problems too. We found that Kenny was a very co-operative and pragmatic leader. Varadkar, I personally felt, was trying to make a name and an impact for himself, which is fair enough because we're all politicians. But he started off as being a lot more intransigent than Kenny. However, he seems to have moderated his position too.

It's to be anticipated that as the process of withdrawal proceeds, there will be changes in position; there have to be. The [UK and EU] joint report published in December showed a significant shift, in some respects possibly a worrying shift from a pro-Brexit perspective.

But nevertheless, in terms of core principles, the Prime Minister hasn't changed. She's still opposed to membership of the Customs Union, for example. She still recognises that we will be leaving the Single Market. The jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, although it may well continue for longer than originally envisaged, ultimately remains a red line. Although there will be some strange residual competence in terms of citizens' rights, that I think has got to be clarified.

**DT: Time limited though?**

**DJ:** Time limited to eight years, which is better than suggested at one particular stage. But probably causes problems for Brexiteers.

**DT: What was it that concerned you in the joint report?**

**DJ:** It was what was unclear. The suggestion that there should be an alignment of regulatory policy was rather unclear. There was a subsequent suggestion that it should only be in those areas affected: Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. But that wasn't clear from the wording of the joint report. It looked very fudgy.

There were other elements too, that were rather worrying. There was an immediate demand by the EU that it should be converted into some binding form, whereas David Davis said that it was intended to be a statement of sincere intent. So confusion reigned within a matter of days of the joint report, and that caused some difficulties.

But the fudginess over Ireland was probably the greatest concern – showing just how difficult it is, in legal terms, to achieve a solution to the Irish question.

Having said that, we mustn't overlook the fact that a lot of the arrangements between the UK and the Irish Republic over the border are bilateral arrangements anyway. They were made easier by the fact that we were part of the European Union, but to suggest that the EU had any major part in forming the Belfast Agreement is over-egging it. I don't think the EU ever had that big a role. We should be able to arrive at a solution, and as I say, Varadkar is now making a lot more conciliatory noises than he was at the time of his appointment as Taoiseach.

**DT: You were Secretary of State for Wales and you're still an MP for North Wales. Did you have a relationship with the Welsh Government as part of your role as Minister in DExEU?**

**DJ:** No, that was mostly dealt with by the Exiting the EU Committee.

A Joint Ministerial Committee was established fairly shortly after the process, and that involved meetings usually chaired by the Secretary of State. I chaired one or two of them as well. Most of the discussions were in that context. There were personal meetings but I didn't have those. David Davis had most of those, and those were with the First Minister. I don't think there were that many of those, most of the negotiations were conducted in committee.

**DT: Have you looked specifically at the implications of Brexit for Wales, and for your constituency?**

**DJ:** Not particularly. There are constitutional issues, the issue of where the competencies that will be repatriated from the EU will lie in those areas where there was devolution. The Welsh and Scottish Governments have been making a bit of a meal of this. There's been an awful lot of posturing going on. The fact is that we implemented devolution at a time when we were part of the European Union, so to suggest that there should be a wholesale transfer of power of everything that is currently held at EU level to the devolved administrations is not acceptable and, frankly, the demands that there should be are disingenuous. I don't think that they expect they will be fully pressed. Most of the significant powers really concern agriculture and fisheries, which are major competences of the devolved administrations. But if you talk to people as I did, for example the National Farmers Union, the Farmers' Union of Wales, they recognise that we need UK-wide frameworks to replace the former EU-wide frameworks. So I don't think that there is ultimately going to be an issue with this.

Though there will be an awful lot of posturing. There may well be an attempt to withhold a Legislative Consent Order. It's going to be interesting, from a constitutional point of view, to see what effect that has. Because both the Wales and the Scotland Acts provide that the Westminster Government will not normally legislate for the devolved administrations but that depends on what the word 'normally' means. That was actually one beneficial effect of the Miller case, because the judges said that they

were not interested in that. So if there were going to be any further arguments about that, they can basically forget about it and not bother the courts with it.

So if there is a need for the British Parliament to legislate for the devolved areas, it's going to be interesting to see what practical effect that has. I'm currently on the Public Administration Committee, which is looking at this very issue, and some academics have been suggesting that it would amount to, not exactly a constitutional crisis, but something fairly outrageous. The fact that provision was made in both Acts for legislation by the British Parliament for the devolved parts of the country means that ultimately people will get used to it if there's a problem. It's hard to see that the British Government could avoid legislating for the devolved areas if the Scots and the Welsh Governments dug their heels in. We'd have to. Because we have to have a coherent statute book, and we have to have a coherent arrangement for our departure from the EU.

**DT: How did you divide up responsibilities among the ministers in DExEU?**

**DJ:** We had various areas of responsibility. For example, Robin Walker had previously worked in the Northern Ireland Office, so it seemed very sensible to ask him to deal with Northern Ireland, because he already had contacts there, he knew the terrain, and was well liked by people on all sides of politics in Northern Ireland. I obviously did Wales. We also had other areas of interest. George Bridges, who was the Lords Minister, did a lot of work with the City, but so did I. I did agriculture, fisheries, aerospace and stuff like that.

We needed more ministers. David Davis couldn't do an awful lot of the leg work, quite understandably. Now a fifth minister has been appointed, Suella Fernandes, which should have been done some considerable time ago. It needed bigger personnel than it had at the outset. It was very busy.

I also did all the European General Affairs Councils. I went to all of those and made some extremely good personal connections there, that made me realise how important personal relationships are. I am still on extremely good terms with a lot of the EU Foreign and Europe Ministers that I met during my time at DExEU. It was a very important part of the work.

**DT: In terms of the role of DExEU, there's a co-ordination function, gathering up the policy positions from different departments and feeding them into the negotiations...**

**DJ:** Yes, it does that sort of work. It co-ordinates right across Whitehall. It's very important to make sure that all Whitehall departments are preparing for Brexit and that they're on track to do so. A big function of DExEU was to ensure that we remained on track. Policy was ultimately agreed upon in the Cabinet sub-committee, the Exiting the European Union Sub-Committee, which David Davis sat on. So the policy was formulated at a central level. But DExEU was, and no doubt still is, the administrative department that made sure that everything was on track, and that any concerns were being fed back into the process for the purpose of policy formulation.

**DT: Brexit involves negotiating, legislating and implementing all at once – it's one of the reasons it's challenging. In terms of the implementation, there seem to be debates in Whitehall about how ready the UK would be in the event of no transition period in March 2019 and what resources get devoted to that preparedness.**

**DJ:** I've been quite vocal about that. The Chancellor appeared before committee and said he wasn't going to be spending any money on that before he needed to do so. I said at the time, and I still believe, that we should be spending the money now. The Prime Minister nuanced the Chancellor's comments fairly shortly after he'd made them, and in the Budget money was in fact made available for our departure.

We need to prepare for leaving without a deal. It's the prudent thing to do, and I think the country expects that of us. We can't rely upon a free trade agreement, and we can't rely either on a transitional arrangement. There will be a huge amount of work to do to prepare us for departure, in terms of physical and human structures, and those arrangements should be being put in place now.

**DT: We're now just over a year off from March 2019. What would you see as the big priorities now, and the ones that you were focusing on while you were a minister?**

**DJ:** Customs certainly. We've got to make sure that we have proper customs arrangements. At the moment, everything that comes in from the EU is subject to no customs checks at all. There are no tariffs. We need to put in place a system to collect tariffs. We need a big increase in personnel, we also need a physical infrastructure. The port that is most obviously directly affected by this is Dover. There's been talk about tailbacks of traffic up to Newmarket! I don't know why poor Newmarket has been targeted but it's an indication that we need to put physical infrastructure in place.

We also need to tweak the IT infrastructure. Fortunately, we've got a new customs system coming on stream, called CDS [Customs Declaration Service], which will be replacing the old one called CHIEF [Customs Handling of Import and Export Freight]. But even then we would need to put in place tweaks to that system to accommodate the fact that we might apply tariffs to imports from the EU if that becomes necessary. So I think that is a big element.

There are other things too. For example, we need to start talking in terms of what arrangements will be made for aviation. That's a major thing at the moment. We've got open skies in the European Union. We have a big advantage in that we've got the most important European airport in the form of Heathrow here. We have allies in the Americans, who want to be able to fly into Heathrow but then fly on to Paris or Berlin or wherever, and they don't want any bureaucracy getting in the way of it. But things like that need to be discussed. Things like medicines licensing, chemical licensing; all these things need to be addressed.

We can't assume that we're going to have an agreement. We have to make arrangements for what will happen if there is no agreement. I think the EU wants an agreement. They recognise that it's impossible for a major EU member state such as the

UK to disappear and to carry on as if nothing had happened. They do recognise that, but I think ultimately it resorts to money, as it always does.

**DT: In its co-ordinating position, DExEU can see across Whitehall how the different departments are preparing for the various scenarios, including as you say the prudent preparation for no deal. Did the departments perform equally in that?**

**DJ:** No, some were far better than others. I'm not going to embarrass anybody by saying who was good and who was bad. Some were really good. Some were not so good, in many cases, through no fault of their own, because a lot of departments have been operating on the basis that we're part of the European Union. They need more resources in order to be able to do their work properly.

But by the time I left, there'd been a huge improvement across the board in the preparedness of departments. But at the outset some were really very unprepared, and didn't have terribly coherent plans in place for dealing with Brexit. We had some extremely good officials in DExEU, who are very good at talking to people in very forthright terms. That just underlines the point I made at the start of this conversation: we're so lucky to have the civil service, because they know how to do things, and they are extremely effective when they need to be, provided they get the right political direction.

**DT: What's the change in the level of preparedness across Whitehall? Was the Budget and the fact that the Treasury made £3 billion available a key moment, or was it something else?**

**DJ:** By that stage I'd left. But no, it wasn't. The key was putting together a team in DExEU whose role was to do just that. That was done very soon after we were appointed, and these guys are extremely effective at talking to other officials in a language they understand. Which is not necessarily impolite, but, as I said, it's very forthright.

**DT: You've had experience of two different departments. How do they compare, in terms of the work you were doing, the culture?**

**DJ:** Utterly, utterly different. The Wales Office is, I think I'm right in saying, the smallest department in government. Its role was confined essentially to policing the constitutional settlement between the UK and Wales, with a certain amount of PR work added on. And important PR work too, because it's important that Wales does see the presence of the British Government as opposed to, "Oh, it's just the Welsh Assembly Government."

DExEU was working on a totally different scale. It was the issue of the day, as I said, the most important issue that this country has faced since the Second World War. It was a department that was expanding very rapidly. It was very exciting that the officials who came were all volunteers. They wanted to go there, by and large, because they were of the view that if they did well, their careers would be advanced significantly. It was a good place to earn your spurs. They were all very high calibre, very impressive. It was a

completely different role, a different atmosphere and certainly a lot more pressured than the Wales Office was.

**DT: As you said, there was a sort of small core brought from the Cabinet Office when DExEU was formed, but it presumably took a while to get people in place. Were there people there who could get things done?**

**DJ:** Yes, absolutely. And the complement of staff grew very rapidly early on. We had about 80 or 90 when I arrived. That rapidly doubled and then, if I remember rightly, went quite quickly to around 350. Then I think there was a certain amount of a plateau. But I last heard that DExEU now had a complement of about 600–700. So it did grow very, very quickly. And you had some very senior people there, former ambassadors and former high commissioners sitting around the table and talking to people who understood the politics at the very highest level.

**Lewis Lloyd (LL): Do you have a sense of how long DExEU will continue in its role for?**

**DJ:** I haven't. Clearly, it's not going to be a permanent department, but I would guess that it's probably sensible to keep it there throughout any transitional process, and right through to our ultimate departure, at the end of the process of transition. And it's probably sensible for it to be there for a little while longer after that, just to make sure any loose ends are tied up. I would think it's probably going to be another four years or so, that would make sense.

**LL: Were there quite clear departments that were going to be more affected by Brexit, from DExEU's perspective?**

**DJ:** Yes, I think so. There are some departments which are impacted less than others, but every department was impacted to a greater or lesser degree.

If you take MoD, for example, most of its international arrangements are via NATO, but nevertheless you have got some EU arrangements too and that is something that it wants to progress. For example, today we are hearing that there's going to be a joint force with the French.

So every department was affected by it, but some very obviously. Defra [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] had basically acted as a kind of transitional office for EU policy for such a long time, and Defra was quite badly affected by it.

**DT: You mentioned earlier that the Chancellor made a statement about making resources available and not spending money before he had to on Brexit, and you disagreed, and then the Prime Minister adjusted...**

**DJ:** I'm not suggesting the Prime Minister said it on the basis of what I said! But people including myself were really quite vocal about it, bearing in mind I'd left government by that stage. It was felt very strongly that we haven't got the luxury of waiting to see what happens, we've got to make sure that we have all the infrastructure necessary in place for if there is no deal. We may well be spending money that will be seen in retrospect as

being spent ineffectively, but you don't know that now. And you won't know until it's too late. So you have to be prudent about it. I think the Prime Minister recognised that you couldn't just wait and see. There are too many issues that you have to address.

**DT: It does seem striking compared to previous governments that in this Government there are voices from different sides of the Cabinet and other ministers saying different things at different times.**

**DJ:** That reflects the fact that we've just gone through a very divisive referendum campaign. The Chancellor now appears to be a lot more reconciled to the fact that we're leaving. He appears to be singing from the same hymn sheet now, at least to a greater extent. But initially there were concerns about that.

**DT: What did that mean for the internal working of government, the fact that there were discordant voices on different subjects outside of government?**

**DJ:** I think that we have to go back to the basic point, which is simply that we've been instructed to leave the European Union. We've had a lot of trying to second guess what the referendum meant, and this is happening still in Parliament. It happened yesterday in the debate on withdrawal, people saying people never voted to leave the Single Market. Actually, they did vote to leave the Single Market, because being in the European Union means that you're subject to the European treaties, which sets up the Single Market, the Customs Union and European Court of Justice. There are a lot of people who are in denial.

It's interesting that the Prime Minister has still endeavoured to maintain this balance between the so-called Remainers and Brexiteers, 18 months after the referendum. I think all ministers now should be recognising that we've had clear instructions, we are leaving. In the national interest, in the British interest, we've got to get the best possible deal, and that means that it will be a deal outside the treaties and everything that implies. There's talk about joining the EEA [European Economic Area], which is bizarre because that's more or less still being a Member of European Union in most respects.

A lot of people had very strong views about whether or not we should be in the European Union, and they still, in some cases, have the same views that they had at the time of the referendum. That is not helpful.

**DT: What advice would you give to a new minister who starts working on Brexit?**

**DJ:** I think it's probably the same advice I gave the last time: just be extremely grateful that you've got the best civil service in the world working for you. You've got officials who, provided they get clear guidance, will do precisely what you want them to do, and they will give you the best advice possible while you make up your mind precisely what that is. So just regard the civil service as an immense resource. Take advantage of them. They are extremely willing and extremely able, and you're very lucky to have them.

## **David Jones was interviewed by Jen Gold and Nicola Hughes on 8 September 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.**

**Nicola Hughes (NH):** Thinking back to when you first started as Minister in 2010, what was your experience of coming into government like?

**David Jones (DJ):** It was very much what I expected. Clearly, as a shadow minister you have contact with government departments so, to a large extent, you do get a good picture of what is involved. I'd actually visited the Wales Office before I was appointed. I'd met the senior members of staff there, which is very useful. So it wasn't too much of a culture shock.

**NH: And was there anything that was particularly surprising or that you weren't expecting?**

**DJ:** I think that the officials were a lot more official than I expected. I had expected, to a certain extent, that there might be a relaxation of the impression that they gave but, no, the officials remained very official. So to that extent, I was quite surprised.

I was very impressed very early with the quality of the documentation, which was extremely good. I have a background in law where good documentation is essential and I found that it was of an extremely high quality in the office.

**NH: You'd done a few previous roles – shadowing the job and you were in the Welsh Select Committee as well.**

**DJ:** I was in the Welsh Select Committee. I was also the shadow junior minister so I stepped straight into the role I'd been shadowing when I was appointed.

**NH: And did that previous experience help you?**

**DJ:** Yes it did, because I was obviously aware of what the current issues were and that made life a lot easier. I didn't have to go through too much of a learning curve. It must be very different if you've been shadowing in another department and then you are actually placed into a completely different department, but I was fortunate.

**NH: And did you have any support in the first few weeks and months?**

**DJ:** Support from whom?

**NH: Private office, outsiders...**

**DJ:** Private office was great. I think that the British civil service is a huge national asset and I was very impressed by the quality of the private office who were extremely helpful. But apart from that, no. I obviously knew what the role was and I stepped

straight into it.

**NH: You went from being a junior minister in the department to being Secretary of State...**

DJ: In the same department.

**NH: Yeah, which was quite rare, I think.**

DJ: Yes.

**NH: What was that transition like? Was there a big difference between the two roles?**

DJ: That was even easier, actually. Of course, I'd been working in the Wales Office for over two years so when I did become Secretary of State it was pretty seamless. I had the same staff. I was dealing with precisely the same issues. My diary was virtually unchanged, so it was extremely easy.

**NH: And what were your big priorities when you went into office? What were the main things that you wanted to achieve?**

DJ: That's driven, to a certain extent, by the agenda of the Government. And, in terms of Wales, there were a number of constitutional issues that were on the go at the time. There was a referendum that had taken place in 2011. We had also launched the Silk Commission on powers for the Welsh Assembly and that was a continuing exercise. And, in fact, Silk dominated my life in the Wales Office from the moment I was appointed until the moment I left. It was the biggest issue of all.

As a Wales Office minister, you're essentially involved in a constitutional exercise and a public relations exercise. Obviously, there are very few administrative powers in the Wales Office but there is a lot of constitutional stuff. And, interestingly also, you have to be across the work of other departments too because other Whitehall departments obviously impinge upon Wales, so you frequently found yourself acting as a buffer in both directions between other government departments and – I hate using the word but I will – 'stakeholders' in Wales.

**Jen Gold (JG): Were there any departments in particular that you were working heavily with?**

DJ: Yeah, Transport is a very big one because, apart from roads, transport isn't really devolved in Wales so that was a big issue. DWP [Department for Work and Pensions] was a massive one because, of course, that's not devolved at all. I had dealings with the police but certainly DWP and Transport were the main ones.

**NH:** You touched on some of the specific roles of the Welsh Secretary there. How would you describe more generally the roles and duties of a minister?

**DJ:** Of a junior minister or secretary of state?

**NH:** Maybe both and what the big differences were that you saw between them.

**DJ:** There isn't really a huge amount of difference because, as I said, I stepped fairly seamlessly from one role into the other. As a junior minister, you're assisting the Secretary of State. My predecessor was very good, so we worked extremely well as a team and when I took over it was straightforward.

The work of a secretary of state, quite apart from the constitutional aspect of the work, there is a great deal of PR. You're dealing with civil society in Wales. There is still huge confusion in Wales as to who does what, notwithstanding devolution having been in place since 1999. A lot of people don't understand who does what.

The other interesting aspect, of course, was that we were a coalition administration whereas, of course, we had a Labour administration in Cardiff that had been there, effectively, since the inception of the Welsh Assembly. They had actually never known a Westminster administration other than a Labour one, so there were inevitable tensions that cropped up and trying to forge personal relationships is extremely important to try and overcome the natural political differences that you have.

**NH:** Just on the PR point, was that mostly in the Welsh media?

**DJ:** Yes, in the Welsh media. And you do an awful lot of travel in Wales, primarily because it's so hard to get round. The transport networks in Wales are very difficult. I'm a North Walian. I've lived in North Wales all my life and I found myself going more and more frequently to South Wales, which was frankly an area I knew less well than London – considerably less well. So you do a lot of travel.

It's quite helpful to be able to speak Welsh, for example; that's quite important. That's another element of the Wales Office that's different; you're dealing with an area of Britain that has got a very different culture from the metropolitan culture that a lot of ministers are more familiar with.

**JG:** And in terms of speaking Welsh, was it needed in terms of your working relationships with the Welsh administration or even in the Wales Office, or was that more important on the public and the PR side?

**DJ:** The lingua franca is English but certainly when you're dealing with Welsh communities it's useful to be able to speak Welsh.

**NH: Just as an aside, I suppose the other ministerial roles that are most analogous to that of the Wales Minister are the Northern Ireland Secretary and the Scottish Secretary. Did you do much by way of comparing notes with them?**

**DJ:** Yes, to a certain extent, although this was always the problem because people were constantly conflating the situation in Scotland with the situation in Wales. And Wales and Scotland, as I kept on reminding people, are very, very different places and, frankly, the Welsh get really quite offended when people lump them into the same bundle as Scotland and Northern Ireland because we're not. But, yes, we did, because obviously there's the devolution aspect which, although not identical, is similar. And we were very close to the Scotland Office which is just across Whitehall – I mean, literally you walk straight across and they walk across to us.

**JG: In terms of the day-to-day reality of being a minister, can you give us a sense of how most of your time was actually spent?**

**DJ:** You start very early and you finish very late, basically. I would usually be in the office before eight o'clock. Much to my annoyance, they used to send a car to pick me up which was really not picking me up; it was picking the red box up, which obviously I had got at home with me.

You start very early. I found that actually quite annoyed the officials because they didn't like me getting in at eight o'clock. They had this thing that there had always to be an official present when I turned up and I told them that the world wouldn't come to an end if they weren't. We used to have 'prayers' [team meetings] every Wednesday, which usually lasted about an hour and a half so that was an immutable part of the weekly diary.

I would usually start the day with my Private Secretary going through the day's agenda. And then really they don't follow a pattern. You may well find that you have a week where there's a lot of parliamentary stuff going on. Other weeks you're doing a great deal of travelling.

The other thing that the Wales Office does, by the way, is act as a kind of embassy for Wales in London. There are always events going on in London. For example, next week there is a big defence exhibition going on in the ExCel Centre. Two years ago I went to that because there were a number of Welsh defence companies that were exhibiting there.

So it's very hard to say it follows a pattern. Then, of course, it continues in the evening. There are, frequently, receptions in the evening; sometimes in Gwydyr House, which we used to use quite a lot as a shop window for Wales. But also out of the office and around London. It was quite varied but Wednesday, I think, was the day that followed the most set pattern with 'prayers' and then obviously PMQs [Prime Minister's Questions]. I'd usually be London-based every Wednesday.

**JG: Obviously there were a number of competing demands on your time: parliamentary business, departmental business, the media, your constituency; how did you cope with those competing demands?**

DJ: You work seven days a week, basically.

**JG: And were there any areas where it was particularly challenging?**

DJ: It's extremely difficult to keep on top of your constituency work because the department, reasonably I think, expects that that work takes priority so you need to have a very good staff in the House [of Commons] and also in the constituency. And you need to be prepared to work all day Saturday and most of Sunday too.

**JG: Are there any strategies or tips you can share, because obviously your constituency is quite a distance from London?**

DJ: Get good staff.

**JG: Right.**

DJ: You really do need extremely good, high quality constituency and Westminster staff.

**JG: And did they operate fairly separately or did you...?**

DJ: No, they worked very much as a team and I would make a phone call to the constituency office every morning, fairly early, to check in and see what was going on. My PA there knew that if there was a problem there would be no difficulty in telephoning me during the day, and if I was busy I'd call back. I used to see my Westminster staff personally every day. They would usually come up to the office and they would go through correspondence and we'd talk about stuff that needed to be talked about. But that is the most difficult aspect; it's making sure that you are continuing to give a service to your constituents as well as to the [Wales] Office.

**JG: Obviously, some MPs try and reserve Friday for being in the constituency. I don't know if that was possible in your situation.**

DJ: Yeah, I used to travel back to North Wales on a Thursday evening and then I'd come back to London on a Sunday afternoon. Friday, I would try to see constituents and do constituency work but sometimes it wasn't possible and I'd be doing stuff for the [Wales] Office. Saturdays, I would usually hold surgeries – in fact, every Saturday I held a surgery. So really it's a seven-day-a-week job. And I think it's a bit more difficult when you're not actually living in London, when you have a constituency that's some distance away.

**JG: I wonder whether you could talk us through an occasion where an unexpected event, or even a crisis, hit the department and how you went about dealing with that.**

**DJ:** There were very few crises. Very few. There was one very early in my career in the Wales Office, just after I'd been appointed – it must have been within a month or two – which frankly was like a script from *The Thick of It*. I can't remember precisely what had gone wrong but I know there were a lot of people running around and trying to talk across one another and I actually said, "This is like *The Thick of It*." But, no, there weren't many crises. The [Wales] Office was very well organised.

**JG: Were there any unexpected events in Wales that you suddenly had to respond to?**

**DJ:** The big one, I suppose, was the Gleision mine disaster. I don't know whether you remember that but there was a drift mine in South Wales that was being operated by a small company and a number of miners were killed. That was very heavy and it happened literally the day before I was due to fly out to America on holiday. Essentially, Cheryl Gillan was the Secretary of State then and we spent all day on the telephone. We kept in close touch with the police and the Welsh Assembly Government. Ultimately, she actually went to South Wales. She also had an incident where there was an explosion in the oil refinery in Milford Haven and, again, she went down there. I subsequently went as Minister to the memorial service. But there weren't that many unexpected events and certainly when I was Secretary of State, we didn't have any.

**NH: What do you feel was your greatest achievement in office or, alternatively, the thing that you're most proud of during your time?**

**DJ:** I suppose taking the Wales Bill through the Commons. I think that's probably the most important thing that I did. It was the culmination of a lot of work. We'd been working on the Silk Commission stuff, and this was the end of part 1 of Silk, and it was delivering on our commitment there. We took that through the Commons very successfully with no amendments.

**NH: What do you think contributed to that success?**

**DJ:** I think because probably it would be very difficult for any of the opposition parties to seek to amend a bill that was giving more power to Wales when they were all committed to more devolution. So I think that that was probably the most helpful bit. But it was very well prepared, had an extremely good, high-quality bill team in the Wales Office – a really good bill team – and we got it through all the various stages successfully.

**NH: Any other reflections on the policy-making process overall in government?**

**DJ:** Well, bearing in mind we were working in a coalition and there were disputes within the Conservative/Lib Dem Coalition as to precisely what should be in the Wales Bill. Ultimately, I think we actually got most of what we wanted, but that was the difference and I think that coalition government is obviously very different from overall majority

government.

**NH: And how did that negotiation happen? Was that through the Cabinet Office and Number 10?**

**DJ:** The Cabinet Office was heavily involved. We liaised with the Cabinet Office in the first place. I was then in negotiations with senior Lib Dems, which was a bit difficult but we got it through. But I think that the most important thing was... I think each individual side has to get its own ducks in a row before going into negotiations and that's what we did. But Cabinet Office was very heavily involved, obviously as well because there were constitutional issues that we were talking about so they would be.

**JG: I'm interested in the role of special advisers (spads). In terms of the Wales Office, did they play much of a part in assisting you?**

**DJ:** Very important, yes.

**JG: In any particular area?**

**DJ:** General politics and the stuff that spads are good at, and looking out for elephant traps. We were only allowed one special adviser but during my time there we had two. Cheryl [Gillan] had one and then I got a new one when I was appointed. There was some talk later on of a Lib Dem spad coming in but that never happened.

But very important, yes. I think special advisers are particularly important in the Wales Office because of the element of dealing with a politically hostile Welsh Assembly Government. So the politics are extremely important and I found mine extremely helpful.

**NH: What about your relationships with the other ministers in your department?**

**DJ:** I had an extremely good relationship with Cheryl Gillan and she remains one of my closest friends in Parliament. In fact, I was just with her; we're both on the Public Administration Committee and we just left there. When she left, Stephen Crabb, who is the present Secretary of State, was appointed. I didn't see so much of him because he was double-jobbing; he was also a whip. At that point, I think there had been a change. You see when I started, there were two Conservative ministers. I think the Lib Dems suddenly woke up to the fact that it was an entirely Tory department in Whitehall so they decided that they wanted to put a peer in as a junior minister and so Jenny Randerson came in. So we didn't have another salary, so Stephen Crabb had to double-job and he was effectively a whip but he was looking in. I got on very well with both of them. I've known both of them for many years. I didn't see so much of Stephen Crabb because he was spending a lot of time here [in the House of Commons]. Jenny Randerson used to look in every day and we carved out the various areas of work that the two of them would do but, of course, I was basically overseeing the whole thing.

**NH: So you would keep watch over the whole brief and then delegate?**

DJ: Yes, although we actually had carved out the areas of responsibility beforehand, but I was obviously interested in everything that was going on. You've got to be careful not to micro-manage and I think that's true with officials, as well.

**NH: You talked about private office but can you talk a little more about the working relationship with your Permanent Secretary and your department?**

DJ: You were talking about tips; I think a very important tip for any minister is to understand that they have a great resource in extremely high-quality people working for them. They are all highly intelligent and to seek to micro-manage their work is a really bad idea. You should certainly get to know your officials but once you get to know them you will soon get to know their strengths and weaknesses and then you can just more or less say, "Well, please do that." And to attempt to micro-manage all their work I think is a really bad idea. I know that Peter Riddell agrees with that. One of the first things he said when we went to one of our induction courses was, "For God's sake, don't try and do everything yourself." And he actually mentioned a past Secretary of State for Wales as being an example of a really bad manager because he had to do everything personally.

**NH: Is that one of the inductions by the Institute?**

DJ: Yes.

**NH: Final few questions now, what did you find most frustrating about being a minister?**

DJ: Risk-averse officials, I think. Probably meaning extremely well but I think a point comes when ministers have to decide what risks they're going to take and then you get the Yes Minister line: "That's very courageous of you, Minister." It still actually happens.

**NH: They may be too confidential, I don't know, but are there any examples you can give?**

DJ: They are too confidential but there are certainly incidents where I've felt that they were erring too much on the side of caution. I think that's a bit of a problem with the civil service generally, actually. You have to be prudent but, at the same time, the business of state is a business and doing business sometimes involves taking risks.

**JG: And you mentioned your work with some of the other departments; what about in terms of the Centre – No 10, Treasury – was there much interaction?**

DJ: A lot. I mentioned the constitutional stuff. Bear in mind that this was all happening at a very important constitutional time because we were leading up to the Scottish referendum. And frankly, Wales was a bit of a sideshow to Scotland. Scotland dominated the last Parliament, really. So whatever we did in Wales echoed in Scotland. So we were dealing a lot with the Cabinet Office and with No 10. It was a very, very close relationship.

**JG: From your observations, are any ways that government could be made more effective? Was there anything that particularly struck you?**

DJ: I suppose if I were to sit down, I could come up with dozens of examples. I think that the structure of the civil service is something that's clearly built up over the generations and there are very good reasons for it. Francis Maude [then Minister for the Cabinet Office] was trying to streamline things while we were there; I'm not sure he entirely succeeded. But one of the things that he came up with was having an enhanced private office and you could have more political appointments and so on. That never actually happened. I actually think that more political appointments are probably quite a good thing, because although it's entirely right that the civil service should be apolitical, its direction is political and therefore you need, I think, frequently more political input than you've got. I think maybe with bigger departments with more spads it may be easier. When you're working with one spad in a small department it's a bit different. But I really wanted more political input than I was getting.

**NH: How did you stay in touch with backbenchers and the party, as a whole, in the more political side of stuff? Was that all through your spad?**

DJ: No. I mean we're obviously here [Parliament] every day, so to that extent, we know what's going on. The trouble is, of course, politically the party tends to banish ministers to the outer reaches so you can't turn up to '22 committee meetings, and so on. So, to a certain extent, you are on the periphery but you've friends in the party and friends in Parliament and you speak to them every day. So you are tapped in. And the spads are always networking – drinking! [laughter] That goes on a lot.

**JG: And based on your experiences, how would you define an effective minister?**

DJ: Got to be hard-working and be prepared to do a lot of hard work. Got to have a thick skin because you get criticised right, left and centre – I was being constantly criticised in the Welsh press. And you've got to believe in what you're doing. You have to focus on what you're doing and carry it through unremittingly. So I think it's a question of being thick-skinned and obsessive, really [laughter].

**NH: Are there any other final pieces of advice that you'd give to people doing the role for the first time?**

DJ: Yes, I think take time to learn your trade; I think that that's quite important. It's great to have the red box and think that you're going to rule the world immediately but it takes a while to get into the rhythm of being a minister. As I said, I was lucky to the extent that I'd been shadowing the position beforehand but even then there were things that I was not used to. And get to know your senior officials; I think that that is extremely important. They will be extremely loyal to you and they want to do everything they can to help you. Do regard them as the most important resource that you've got. As I said, I think we have a great national resource in the civil service in this country. Good officials are absolutely invaluable.

**JG: And just to pick up on your advice to new ministers, you mentioned that you did the Institute for Government induction. Is there any outside support that you think they should seek out or is it mainly briefing internally within the department?**

**DJ:** I can't think of any outside support I took, apart from the IfG. I did do, now who was it? Someone came and did what they call a 360-degree assessment of me, which was quite useful. I think that that was from the Cabinet Office. That was quite good because what they actually do is talk to you and then they go and talk to your officials, as you probably know, and then your officials will give an assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. That's really quite useful.

**JG: And that's not something that most ministers participate in but you think that's valuable?**

**DJ:** I found it really good.

**NH: Did you change much about your behaviour or what you were doing as a result of it?**

**DJ:** No, because I had an extremely good assessment [laughter]. But I could imagine myself changing things. I think that if somebody said, "Well, you know, this chap's a bit cantankerous", or whatever, you might possibly change the way you react. And, as I said, the officials are extremely loyal but you have to obviously treat them with all the respect they deserve because they're highly qualified people and probably far brighter than you as a minister.

**JG: In hindsight, would you have approached the role differently in any way?**

**DJ:** Probably but, if you're going to ask me for examples, I couldn't think of any. I think, yes, to the extent that you learn the trade as you progress. So, obviously, after four years there you're a lot better than you were on day one and it's like anything else, things become easier. You're not killing yourself so much doing the same work. So, yes, but if you were to ask me for specific examples I couldn't give them to you. But certainly, I would have done things differently if I'd known on day one what I knew towards the end of my ministerial career.

**NH: Is there anything else that you wanted to add?**

**DJ:** No, except that it's a wonderful opportunity, I think, for anybody. I think that the insight that you get into national life is wonderful. You are doing interesting things and you're meeting interesting people. You may be getting exhausted but it doesn't last that long, anyway, especially with this Prime Minister – most people get shuffled out after a relatively short time. So just enjoy it, work as hard as you can and you have an experience that will be unmatched. Very few people get to sit at the Cabinet table so it's a privilege.

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