

Ministers Reflect Justine Greening



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Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2005–present: Member of Parliament for Putney, Roehampton and Southfields

Government career

2016–18: Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities

2012–16: Secretary of State for International Development

2011–12: Secretary of State for Transport

2010–11: Economic Secretary (HM Treasury)

Justine Greening was interviewed by Daniel Thornton and Tess Kidney Bishop on 1 May 2018 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

Justine Greening reflects on Brexit, dealing with resistance to change and making sure policy is implemented. She argues that government is in need of 'ginormous' reform and that more diversity is a question of will.

Daniel Thornton (DT): Perhaps we could start at the beginning, when you first got the call from David Cameron to become a minister.

Justine Greening (JG): Yes, he was on a train. It promptly cut out, of course, because mobile signals aren't great on a train. The next thing I know, I'm not Economic Secretary to the Treasury anymore, a job that I absolutely adored. I'm suddenly Secretary of State for Transport, with all that that brought.

DT: If we rewind to when you were appointed as Economic Secretary, what happened then?

JG: First of all, everyone had been waiting a long time because we'd had the election, there hadn't been a majority government, so there were the coalition talks going on. So it was slightly delayed gratification in a way. A lot of calls had already been made to ministers, so quite a few of my friends had already had a call. I genuinely didn't come into politics for a job. So I just thought: "Well, we'll see."

But in the end I got a plum job in [the] Treasury as part of this team that had to go into the Treasury that day and start sorting out this monumental deficit and mess that had been left by the outgoing government. I remember reading the memo that Nick Macpherson [then Permanent Secretary to the Treasury] had written to George Osborne as the incoming Chancellor about the level of challenge that we all faced. We then set about quite systematically working through how to do, and then delivering, a Budget in 50 days. It felt like a lifetime. When I look back on it now, having been in government for a long time, I realise how amazing that whole process was: to go from pretty much a standing start, to delivering the Budget 50 days later. But that's what we did.

DT: What was your role in that process?

JG: I looked after all of the taxes that really weren't corporation tax, National Insurance and income tax. I loved that job because although people feel [the] Treasury is all about numbers and money, which it is, to me it was all about people. Because the taxes I looked after were the ones that people understood and cared about. It was vehicle excise duty, fuel duty, alcohol duty, some of the green taxes, air passenger duty, gambling duty. All of the things, if you like, that people get much more engaged with on a day-to-day basis and actually quite understand. In the time that I was there, I got the

Treasury looking much more systematically at behavioural economics and how it fed into taxation policy, and the Laffer Curve and all of that.

DT: How did the civil service in the Treasury and HM Revenue and Customs [HMRC] react to a new administration? Presumably a lot of them couldn't remember when there was last a Conservative government.

JG: I remember asking them after about a fortnight what people were saying about the new team and I was told: "Actually, everyone's saying how nice you lot all are." That's what we were told. I think at the beginning there's quite a human process going on: how are these people actually going to deal with us? Treat us day to day? After that, maybe to the extent that civil servants had been aware that they were at the end of a government, they want to get on with some direction and some ideas. I think they were really keen to get on the case with the deficit reduction programme and working out what that looked like. So they were very positive.

I've always admired civil servants because I feel that they do something I couldn't. I couldn't switch direction like that. Because I have my own views about what I think good looks like and I think it would be very hard to be a civil servant working on something that I really did not feel was my version of what good looked like. The civil service plays this unique role. It's why when I ended up being International Development Secretary and you head over to places like Afghanistan, often the first thing that Hamid Karzai [then President of Afghanistan] would raise with me was: "Why can't I have the British civil service?" For all of its challenges and flaws, the role it plays in enabling MPs who become ministers to do what we did in the Treasury team: come in and quickly start taking and enacting decisions that are necessary for the country's wellbeing. That's, I think, when they're at their best.

DT: Ministers sometimes say that the civil service resists change. Did you find that?

JG: Not so much. My personal view is that's quite a lazy stereotype. I think when you properly engage with civil servants, and discuss what you want to try to accomplish and why, for the most part they go with you. I always think in terms of people, processes and systems that sit behind policy. But once you've got your 'delivery mechanisms' in place, you should be able to track what's going on. So if you're clear cut about what needs to be accomplished by when and the tramlines by which projects that are going off track then get escalated up to you, you should have a pretty good sense of when things are going off track. Similarly, if you have a good private office, they should day to day be kicking the tyres on all of those plans and chasing down your to do list when you've not heard back from officials and things are taking longer than you expect.

The other question I think ministers also have to ask themselves is: if there is resistance, why? Get to the bottom of it. Is it that they just don't agree and there is this underlying politics? They're only human. Fine. In that case tough. Got to crack on. But if it's because there's some reticence about the delivery plan or it's an unachievable

objective, you'd better find out about that sooner rather than later because otherwise it will pop out later on in the process. What I was always quite careful to do when I arrived in departments was say: "Right, I want a 'bring out your dead' process here. For the next few weeks I want to hear about the things that you're worried about, that you think are a bit of a mess and I want them on the table so we can resolve them. What I won't accept is six months down the line suddenly being told that something is way off track."

So I think it's about creating quite an open culture where people can raise things with you as a minister and then having behind that a level of respect. I would always say to them: "There'll be times when I simply don't agree and we'll push on and that's that." I never had any push back really from civil servants on that. They just want to know clear-cut routes forward and they want to know when you're very much prioritising one thing. They want to know that if there are problems they can raise them and get rapid-ish decisions. They like a clear-cut process that they know where they're at in. For me, as a minister, that's what I always liked as well.

DT: So in the early days as a minister, you effectively encouraged challenge, and you didn't like surprises later on. But sometimes there are surprises. How did you deal with that?

JG: I'm always happy to have challenge, and I always encourage quite open discussions. What I'm saying is that I like to have things on the table at an early stage. The times that I would be frustrated and think that performance was unacceptable was when people sat on things and either didn't fix them or, worse, didn't give me the sight that I needed to have of them even though they were important, and therefore didn't give me the chance to task officials on what I felt needed to be done to fix them. Things do go wrong. That is the inevitable fact of life. You are running a department that is running stuff for the public. Stuff crops up.

We had some stuff in the DfE [Department for Education] that we managed very effectively. For various reasons it became apparent that a whole load of chemistry teachers around the country had not disposed of a certain chemical before its best before date, and had they not done that it could be potentially volatile. So we suddenly had to go through a process of checking every single school in the country and asking all these chemistry departments to look at what was going on and actually engaging, I have to say, with the bomb squad to be on hand. There were a few localised stories of things being blown up in school playing fields, in a controlled fashion. But that's because it was brought to me really quickly and, having spent three and a half years in DfID [Department for International Development], I knew all about how you respond to emergencies. So we had everything in place really quickly, we had a hotline, I had every contingency plan and we systematically had a plan in place. Everyone knew what to do and all these chemistry teachers went to the back of the cupboard and discovered whether or not they too had failed to clean it out for the last five years. It's a good

example of where that was brought to me pretty quickly, we got a plan in place and it was dealt with. Stuff happens. It's how you respond to it. And of course I did say a massive thank you to all the officials after.

Grenfell's another one. The Kensington Aldridge Academy was right in the shadow of Grenfell Tower and those kids were just about to start doing their exams, their A-levels and GCSEs. The department brilliantly ran towards it, worked with the school, in quite a low-key fashion but just got in there. We worked out how to find a different site for the school and basically by September it was open. That was really important. Some of them had lost friends, family, they'd lost pupils, so keeping some normality after what happened was really important for those children. For me, that was an important moment for the department because it showed them really rising to a challenge and we did lots of celebration after that with the school. In fact when I left I got this lovely letter from David Benson, the head teacher, just sort of saying: "Thanks for everything you and the department did." They'd just got their Ofsted outstanding at that stage. So things do go wrong but for me it was a moment to say: "Right, how can we get on with stuff and work together as a team?"

DT: Coming back to the Treasury, how did George Osborne run the team of ministers?

JG: He basically tasked out what we all needed to do with our areas. We had a clear process over the course of the first week or so being briefed on the key issues, about what the key opportunities were in relation to the Budget. Then there was a very clear-cut process about when we were to feed back to him as Chancellor on the long list of options with our advice. Alongside that, we then got the feedback from the Chancellor's office on that. So we did see him a fair amount, but the principal leg work was done offline in our individual private offices and then brought together periodically to sort of see how this jigsaw was coming together.

I probably spent more time with someone like David Gauke [then Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury]. He was the person looking after the other bit of taxation policy. We've been good friends for a very long time and also had been in a shadow Treasury team together before government. At the time of the election, I was in shadow DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government] but then was brought back into the Treasury team when we actually hit government. So yes, those relationships worked pretty effectively.

DT: What about the role of the Chief Secretary [David Laws and then Danny Alexander], given that they were from the Coalition party?

JG: I often felt in those early days in government when we sat in sub-committees, it was hard to spot which one of the people was the Lib Dem. What it kind of showed is that, although we argue about a lot of stuff, actually probably 80% of things largely are agreed. So I think Danny quite quickly worked up good relationships with the rest of the

team. He absolutely looked out for his party, which was probably his role. But overall, I felt the team worked pretty effectively.

DT: You touched on the preparation you'd done before you came in as a minister as part of the shadow team. What else do you think helped you prepare for that specific role as Economic Secretary but also generally as a minister?

JG: I just think having spent 15 years in business, in large organisations. I can only speak for myself but I went into [the] Treasury with a very clear sense of what I expected to see in terms of the governance and control structure and management reporting in a large organisation. So that's what I put in place. Sometimes it wasn't there and I think that's part of the problem with government. It sets itself apart from industry too much. As I left Treasury I was actually just drafting George [Osborne] a note saying: "Yes, government is different to business but not this much."

DT: What did you want to see that wasn't there?

JG: I'd probably have to go back to my note... But I felt that some of the management reporting was quite poor. I think there's a lot of data that civil servants use but often ministers don't ask for it. It's almost like ministers don't know they're meant to get a monthly reporting pack, which they should. They should be told how the department is assessing risk and tracking when things go offline. They should know what their MI [management information] is. They should know what the processes are for business case development and they should be happy and have signed off at what stage ministers input into that process. I'm not sure that's always in place. Sometimes if a minister does put it in place, maybe it's just seen as that particular minister's control structure when actually, it should be consistent across government. I've never seen finance managed like this in any other organisation I've ever worked in. I've not seen a group finance function staffed up with generalists, who are clever, highly intelligent, highly talented, but nevertheless not trained accountants. That's our finance function for the country.

DT: Yes. The Institute is very supportive of the development of the finance function and the other professions across the civil service.

JG: Yes. I mean, I know why it's done like this, it's obviously around Treasury maintaining its control, but there are lots of different ways for a finance team to be able to control resourcing in an organisation and manage long-term value. Lots of reform is needed there, in my personal view.

DT: You then became Secretary of State for Transport. What changed from being a junior minister to being Secretary of State?

JG: The bandwidth that you have to cover changes. You have to manage a team, whereas before it's really you and your private office and that's a much smaller team. Although, you've got lots of civil servants reporting into that whole thing. You're much

more on the point for talking to colleagues in Parliament. There's the whole strategic piece of it as well. Literally, where do you want this agenda to go? Probably 70% of what you do as a minister and Secretary of State is stop things from going horribly wrong in about nine months' time. But 30% is absolutely setting a more strategic agenda and, more than that, going beyond the policy to saying how to deliver it.

Obviously it's always exciting doing new ideas and new policy, but I think the delivery piece of things often gets overlooked. Both in terms of its development and its tracking, how you get things back on track when they've deviated, which sometimes inevitably happens. Things don't necessarily roll out as perfectly as you expect. It's like launching a product. You might think the customer's going to love it but it lands and then you have to course correct a bit on the back of that. So I had to work out how to run the whole thing whilst having clear delegation lines. What I've always done is have very clear delegation lines and delegation letters. I've always been clear with my private office about what I want to see pulled up for me to have a look at.

The way I run the ministerial team is we have a team meeting every week. But then for individual ministers, one week I will have a one to one. The following week they will do what I always called an 'omnibus', which was their summation of what they're working on, what's on their mind, where they feel the risks are, what they want to flag up to me. In other words, their analytical review of what they think I need to be aware of. That would then really form the basis of the meeting the following week and so on and so forth. Then I'd have project-based meetings as well on key policies and projects that mattered. That gave us a bit of a rhythm and a structure to how we worked.

The other thing is each department was different, so the way you managed it had to shift. I did clock that. They're all different beasts. Transport: there's a massive operational piece there. Irrespective of whether you've subcontracted some franchise out, when it goes wrong it ends up on your desk. And it's an investment department, so it's about how do you do a portfolio. DfID is a massive spending department, so again it's a portfolio question. But there's a huge dose of foreign affairs in there that you can't really quantify. So it's a very different series of calls around what good looks like. Then Education was entirely different again. I could control DfID through the business cases of investment largely, because that principally was a route into discussions around diplomacy, Foreign Office, etc. But once you get into a department like Education where most of the grants are block grants given to schools, then it's a very different beast to try and get a clear line of control through.

DT: In DfID you changed the spending approval threshold from £40 million to £5 million.

JG: That was a wonderful moment. Maybe because I'm an accountant, in a way I've always understood organisations through the money. I've always liked numbers because generally they're either going up or they're going down. When you've found the right number and then found whether it's going up or going down, then you have

the story of what needs to be done and what's actually happening. So in that sense, that was a natural place for me to start to get a grip on what the department was doing.

I remember talking to the Perm Sec about the fact I wanted to see the spend before it was authorised and saying: "I think maybe if we put it down to £5 million..." He said: "Well, that will mean you see everything," and I thought: "Fine with me. I can relax it later if I want to, that's not off the table, but for the moment I'm going to find out about this department through okaying everything that is now coming up for decision." And that meant I got to change all the business cases etc. I remember him saying to me: "When do you want to bring that in?" I just thought, unless I say now a whole slew of stuff's going to get approved overnight, isn't it? So I said: "As of now." That was the wonderful moment.

DT: I can see the Permanent Secretary blanching.

JG: He said: "You're going to be very busy" and I just thought: "I know, that's fine." My responsibility is to get a grip on what we're doing.

DT: How did it work out? Did you spend a lot of time looking over a lot of detailed cases?

JG: Fine. It all got gridlocked for a few weeks but not in the way that meant we couldn't triage the super important, time-critical stuff. It meant the department got to learn how I took decisions and the level of detail I wanted. They actually quite liked the engagement to be honest. They'd put a lot of time into these business cases and I think the chance to discuss with me in more detail some of them and me pushing back, going "I don't get it, this just doesn't make sense," it actually worked brilliantly. By the time I'd arranged how junior ministers could then do some of that tyre kicking it worked fine.

What came out of it was better business cases that actually focused on what we needed to look at. We came out with a consistent approach on risk which we didn't really have. I beefed up internal audit so that we had much better capacity to follow up things that were going off track. We were able to get projects not only right-sized but we were able to look at the portfolio as a whole, how much risk did we want in it, where did we want to pitch it, what was the blend between humanitarian versus development. We were able to take some decisions in the round but then have a process that sat behind it on delivering those to the business cases. That meant we had confidence that a) these were strategic spends that fitted into a broader plan, and b) what they were proposing was the right choice of how you implement the strategy. Because there were always choices.

DT: You can do a cost benefit analysis of High Speed 2 or something, and have a reasonable handle on the benefits and the costs. But if you're doing something like governance reform in Afghanistan, coming back to Karzai's question, you can measure the cost but the outputs are pretty intangible, right?

JG: Well, it depends. If you're doing taxation, we were able to say that literally for every dollar we invested, we were getting 40, 50, 60 dollars back in extra tax revenue. You're right, you can't put a value on everything but what it pushed us to do was to start looking at high, medium and low. Where did we feel we would get capacity up to? What was the length of time that you needed for that capacity to change? Was there an exit plan about when we could step back? How politically committed was this government? Were they putting any money in? There were some places where I basically said we weren't investing anything in a project unless the Government themselves were investing alongside us and therefore, had flagged it as their own political priority, so we would be able to steadily hand over.

So there were other ways by which you could say: "Does this have the signs of long term success that we would expect?" That's why, in a way, it was such a complex role because there were some judgement calls there about the political capacity in the country, the capacity of the ministries you were working with. Say, Education in Pakistan at the Punjab level – were they committed? Did they have the civil servants to really take it on? It gave you a chance to look at things in the round.

Yes, you can't put a price on everything but you can start to narrow down what good looks like and you can have a systematic sense of how risky a project is and what the variation of outcomes might be and whether that's acceptable or not in the context of that underlying project itself.

DT: And you thought that system of control picked up potential problems that you or the department would have otherwise missed?

JG: Yes. I got MI [management information] every month broadly that told me how many projects were rated C, that told me how much of my portfolio was deemed high risk by nature. So delivering aid in Syria is just high risk, it's a war zone. We were able to say: "Does this look and feel acceptable?" For the projects that were getting outside of their tramlines, we had a very clear process for getting them back on. It involved six months of intensive support, a review, an open further six months of support depending on the nature of the project and whether we felt it was showing signs of being able to be got on track. For those that don't deliver, there was a clear process for either curing or killing, that clearly flagged up ministers. So everyone knew when the reviews were meant to happen.

As we put the architecture in place, it flagged up that some of the reviews were being pushed back by staff because they thought the project wasn't ready. That defeated the whole object of it. So we then tightened up and clarified that process, clarified who

could go on the system, and changed it and got an audit trail around that. Then we got good process. You might not like what comes out of it but you were able to take action on it.

My pitch into the department was: people hate working on projects that are going off track – it's not much fun. It's quite stressful to know that your project's got problems. It needed to be an environment where people would pretty much talk openly and flag that up, get it dealt with one way or another. So if the plan wasn't realistic, then either you decide the project is not worth it or you change the plan. That has to be then agreed and shared by everyone and then you get on with it. What you can't do is have plans that are unrealistic and not decisioned.

Tess Kidney Bishop (TKB): Had you tried to use that approach in Transport as well?

JG: I wasn't at Transport long enough really. What I did at DfID, I was beginning at Transport. I got the time and space in DfID to go through a much broader change process. I should say all of the process changes that we needed required, alongside it, people change. Every single project had somebody directly in charge, there was a responsible person for it, even if it was small. That was really great for more junior staff because they had their portfolio. We did training alongside that that went through the whole organisation. Then we, as I said, had to tighten up some of the systems stuff so that our management information was simply reliable and timely and we all understood what it could tell you but also what it couldn't tell you. So if there was a qualitative aspect of things that we wanted to pick up, you would have to get that a different way.

We were going through that process within the DfE. They'd already got a change process underway when I arrived, but it just didn't feel like it had really taken hold, for various reasons. We were just relaunching it over the past six months with a new Non-Exec Director, Richard Pennycook who had done lots of change at the Co-op successfully. So we were bolstering our capacity to be able to change the DfE. But it was much more about clarifying what civil servants were doing, what the parameters were that they could take judgement calls within, how they then escalated stuff up to ministers and building a more open environment where they could feed up ideas and suggestions. It's much more of a team approach really. But very hands on from me. If you talk to those Perm Secs, I would guess they'd say I asked for more information, I got more data, I wanted to see processes. So I was much more on the delivery piece of it and what happened after I'd seen the civil servant submission.

TKB: Were you encouraging your junior ministers to follow through on that?

JG: Yes, I expected them to do that. I remember one of them saying to me once: "Oh, I thought we just did policy." I was like: "No, that's the beginning of your responsibilities. We're here to change things on the ground for people. So I'm afraid if all you've got is a policy then don't get surprised when it lands wrongly and you don't know about it until you get hauled in for an urgent question."

Part of this is, I think, ministers needing to know what they have to see and when they have to see it in order to have assurance that things are happening on the ground as they expect. Otherwise it's like a black box. You just sign up on the submission and then it may or may not ever happen. Then I guess you end up being a minister that complains that civil servants don't do stuff, but maybe if you had all the right governance around it, you would be able to work with them to make sure your stuff happens.

TKB: HS2 [High Speed 2] was formally announced while you were at Transport. How did you manage the politics around that?

JG: There was an issue in that we just hadn't done a major railway line since the Victorian times. We'd done High Speed 1, it was something like 80 miles. It was nowhere on the same scale strategically as High Speed 2.

I'd spend a huge amount of time with colleagues really getting under the skin of how it was going to affect their individual patches. As somebody with a massive transport issue on my own patch, Heathrow, I handled it with as much care as I would have liked someone to handle that for me. I literally went down the entire route personally and looked at every single bend in the track to make sure that if we could miss this or do that, that we did. Or that at least we cited the fact that there were trade-offs. In the end, we did the tunnel under part of the Chilterns to try and protect that area. It was clear to me that it was very much the beginning of a process, to then continue to evolve it as it went forward. It was very detailed and I put a huge amount of time into it.

TKB: Did you feel the department had the skills to manage the public opposition?

JG: They had some capacity but I felt that it was theory not practice with them, because we hadn't really done a new railway line for such a long time of any substance. There was a little bit of memory of High Speed 1, but even that's some time ago now. I would have thought that the capacity is much stronger now than it was then. Even understanding how to bolt on the economic regeneration opportunities. We were quite busy and focused doing all of that, but these things take time to come together.

TKB: How were you working with other departments across government on those economic regeneration opportunities?

JG: That work was underway. I wasn't there long enough to follow through on it. I should also say that at the same time we delivered the Olympics. So there were two major projects that we were working on. One was this long-term High Speed 2. The second was literally how do you, from a transport perspective, fit millions of tourists into a city that's already so congested it's got a congestion charge. The department was exceptionally busy.

We really had to get through the decision of do we or don't we make the proposal to get on with High Speed 2, and what technically is the strawman track, in order to then be able to understand what the regeneration opportunities were. Because depending

on what your decisions were about, for example, where the station was going to be in Birmingham, clearly that had very different implications for regeneration. Ditto on phase two. Whether you pick Crewe or Stoke totally transformed the regeneration opportunity. So in a way, you had to say what is it before you could then say what were the opportunities around it.

TKB: So the decision on HS2 was made more on the basis of the original cost benefit analysis than wider economic benefits?

JG: Predominantly, yes. The business case would include agglomeration and all of those broader societal and economic benefits. But they were more at the macro level rather than a micro locality level. There was also recognition that if the Victorians had done a BCR [benefit cost ratio] on the classic rail network, it probably would have been negative. Yet of course it's transformational. And any value in the 21st century would have been discounted to zero because of discounting rates.

Government hadn't done long-term investing. Even now government is not good at valuation on long-term investments, either of infrastructure or perhaps more crucially people. That's bound in the fact that we do five-year plans, five-year spending reviews. We won't know what the envelopes are for departments until 2019 when Treasury does its spending review. You want long-term plans? I can't think of many organisations where you don't know what a departmental budget will be in two years' time.

DT: There are some long-term projects though, like High Speed 2.

JG: We'll be getting the benefits of High Speed 2 for years. We've had the benefits of the Victorian railways for 100-odd years. How do you put a value on that strategic importance to the country? That's the problem. Conventional valuation, NPV [net present value], is really much more designed for typical day-to-day business decisions. I've done a million of them in my career. But for countries looking at much longer-term strategic decisions, we don't really have anything approaching a sophisticated, adequate valuation approach.

You need to find a way around the shortcomings of a traditional NPV calculation. An annuity calculation after 30 years, it discounts at zero more or less. That's just how the maths work. The maths only gets you so far in understanding the strategic value of these projects. So just be conscious of that fact. High Speed 2 was probably a good example of a project that fell foul of the strategic, long-term nature and benefits that it would give.

DT: Railways don't stack up very well in cost benefit analysis on the whole.

JG: And they didn't for the Victorians interestingly, yet I don't think anyone would say Britain would be better if we didn't have them.

DT: You've overseen a lot of projects while you were a minister. What would your advice be to other ministers about the questions they should ask about projects?

JG: You need to be clear on objectives. You need to be clear on the relative prioritisation of what can be competing objectives at times so that you know when you're making a trade-off. You need to have good data. Where that's not possible, you need to be really clear what you don't know and, therefore, what the risk is that you're accepting, whether you're willing to accept it, what you're going to do if that risk crystallises and whether that's a go/no-go decision.

I would argue on something like Heathrow, that project is being taken forward without actually having addressed the feasibility questions, which are go/no-go on things like air pollution. It's jumped the gun. The order is wrong as a result. There'll be things that probably show you can't do it. But because they've been pushed back, they'll then get answered when it comes at a big cost instead of being answered when it's a timely fashion that then tells you, probably, you need to find a different alternative.

So you need to be very clear on whether you feel you've got your capacity in place as a team. The ministers but, crucially, the civil servants. Where you feel that, for whatever reasons, whether it's missed your bandwidth or civil service bandwidth doing the day job, they cannot take on a big project, looking at the Olympics for example, you then need to tackle that. Have a different body of people doing it. Then you need to know how you're going to manage the interface of the department with that body, how you as a minister are going to have line of sight through to performance of that body, what is their project plan, what's the chronology of what you're expecting and when.

I'm afraid what I'm saying is: you have to get into the detail of it. And you have to have a proper plan. If it's about change, then you have to have a transition plan to go alongside the implementation plan. How do you get from where you are now to the new steady state? What happens in that process to all of your people affected by it? Implementing something might be a systems fix. You'll be able to switch it on when you've done a new system. But the policy and practicalities of how you transition people from that old basis to this new basis, that's something entirely in addition that needs to be in place. What it shows is that policy ideas and development is just the start of a proper strategy to help change things for better in Britain. Too often, in all governments, you see some policy but it's not grounded. People push on a journey, not really sighted on the challenges and what's required.

DT: Did Saint Helena Airport cross your in tray while you were at DfID? It seems there was a technical problem with the assessment at the beginning in terms of the ability of planes to land.

JG: I probably can't talk as much about that because that was already decided before I got there. As I understand it, we had a duty to make sure you could get to Saint Helena, legally as well. Therefore, the main question was: given that the boat's about to

pack up in the next five, 10 years, what do you do after? There was a huge campaign by a whole load of MPs to say it's pointless just getting a new boat, that doesn't help Saint Helena; what we should do is get an airport and in doing so there's economic regeneration around it, so it's more than just a transport access strategy. I think Andrew Mitchell [Secretary of State for International Development, 2010–12] agreed with this. They developed the airport plan, but I think it's probably a case where the innate challenges around that and the high risk of the project crystallised. So it then had to be dealt with. But I'm going to guess that when the project was done by Andrew, people did have a sense that it was a challenge. Otherwise somebody would have probably done the airport before. My sense of having looked at it afterwards was that the broader judgement was we should do this.

DT: Moving to cross-government work, I'm interested in your perspective on how Cabinet committees worked. How did that change over time under David Cameron and Theresa May? Were there cabinet committees that were more or less effective in their discussions?

JG: I don't think it particularly changed with different PMs. Most of it comes down to who's chairing the committee and often if you're a junior minister, then it's the Secretary of State. I felt that for the most part the committees were broadly effective.

Although, I always used to marvel at how different they were from business. In business, you arrange a meeting to talk about some stuff that you need to sort out. Then you get to the meeting, you all bring your ideas and then you work out what's best, you agree it, and then you go off and do it. In government: "Oh, the officials have already done that for you." So in government, you've got all your briefing that's been given to you of what's already been agreed by them. Then you're there, they say, to defend your corner, in case anyone actually discusses things properly. I remember thinking it was totally back to front when I turned up. There's this sense that often, if everyone's happy, it's quite rubber stamping: there's a paper – does anyone have any problems with it?

Sometimes people felt there were too many committees. It was a bit of a waste of time, especially if you didn't really have a dog in the game because it was peripheral to your department. A minister would be sat there for two hours just to make sure that nobody suddenly landed the Department of Health with some onerous extra responsibilities from left field. But for the most part, as a system, it probably works as well as it can.

Some of the task forces had very varying quality to them in terms of what they were able to achieve and accomplish. I felt sometimes the co-ordination was used as a reason to not quite take responsibility for things by some departments, maybe some ministers. Bottom line is if it's happening in your patch, that's what you've got to look after. If it's happening in somebody else's patch, they're on the point for delivering it.

You can do all the interfacing you like but there's a fundamental thing that if somebody's dropped the ball, say at HMRC, then that childcare system isn't going to be able to deal with all of the enquiries that come into it. You can ask all the right questions, but if somebody gives you factually wrong answers or things that you can't disprove, you can't do much. "Will the system will work?" They will say "yes." "How do you know it will work? What's your evidence base for saying it will work?" "We know it will work because we've done a similar system for tax credits and that had this number of people. For this policy on this area, we expect half of that number and therefore the servers and everything should be able to cope." Imagine that but with more detailed questions around it. Basically, benchmarked against something that's happened, that's all fine. But then there are still other issues with the system. Then it's not in your department anyway. There's only so much kicking of tyres you can do. If people are giving you incorrect judgements because they've got them wrong, then things get tripped up.

DT: And it's that much harder if you're doing that from outside of a department I suppose?

JG: Yes. There's only so much I could do. I was rattling the Chief Secretary's chains on this because it was in the Treasury department to be managed, and this was clearly mission critical on our flagship policy. That was, actually, largely delivered, other than the system bit, surprise surprise. Aside from that, the main thing I did was pushing to make sure that there was the level of HMRC support for the system over the Christmas period and HMRC asked me whether the DfE would pay for it. I wrote back and said "Why don't we do Payment by Results? Because you're really keen on that and so am I. So tell you what, I'll pay for it if you actually deliver." That was over Christmas and I didn't get a response back. I left the department. I'm sure they smiled ruefully to themselves when they saw my suggestion that I use Payment by Results on them. But that was the basis on which we did it.

DT: While you were DfID Secretary, how did foreign policy co-ordination work? There was a drift for non-DfID departments to spend more of the 0.7% foreign aid spending target, which I think started while you were Secretary of State.

JG: It's partly driven through strategy. Actually, we wanted a pan-government policy on aid and development. That was absolutely something that I felt was quite important. I did not want to see the Department for International Development almost working independently. I felt that had been a problem for it. It was a really important leg of our foreign policy and therefore it did need to be hooked in.

Where you tended to get the downside of that was that people in other departments, particularly the Foreign Office, didn't always spend the aid wisely. It's as simple as that. They would sometimes be prepared to put money into quite nugatory, non-strategic projects that weren't really going to change anything. And then they weren't always

managed and controlled. So there was a question about whether that was the most efficient way to deliver basically, decisioning wise. But for the most part, that's an issue about how you then deliver that strategy effectively. It doesn't mean that the strategy itself is wrong.

The other downside to it, from my perspective, that always needed to be managed, was that if, let's say, you're the DfE and somebody wants you to do some work on policy support, the bottom line is that your core objective is running schools in England. Whereas spending aid effectively and having an effective aid strategy was the guiding mission of the Department for International Development. So if you were spending aid through other departments where it was much lower down their priority list, you just had to be aware that they weren't necessarily going to be having that close management of it in the way that it would have had through the Department for International Development. Again, it's possible to mitigate that, but if you want a successful approach you need to do that.

TKB: You were also Minister for Women and Equalities the last few years. What would your advice be on managing that role alongside your other responsibilities?

JG: Find the mission and work out where government can really have impact. For me, it was about advocacy and action. You can't do everything but what you can do is really convene and corral and motivate change on the ground, working with loads of amazing civil society actors. So, for example, I did the Girl Summit and it shone a light on FGM [female genital mutilation] in the UK as well as abroad, also forced marriage and child marriage. It provided a moment, really, for us to decide to up our game and to help other people working on this [to] get additional investment and funding. So it's just clarity on what you're trying to accomplish and prioritisation across those issues about what you think is most important. Simple as that.

The question is if you could wave a magic wand and change three things, what would they be? Whether you're an MP or a minister, if you can't ask this question then basically you've not prioritised effectively. That's one way of looking at it. The other way of looking at it is if I had one more pound to spend, where would I spend it? Why? And how? If you can't answer those questions as a minister, you haven't prioritised and your department doesn't have the data to tell what you're doing and what's value, because you'd be able to answer the pound question if you did.

TKB: Turning to inside government, how do you think there can be more diversity in ministers and particularly in Cabinet?

JG: You have to decide that it matters. It's as simple as that. People pick teams. Pick diverse teams. End of. If you've got a pipeline problem, have a pipeline strategy and then deliver on that. It really is a question of will.

DT: Do you think the Government's doing that at the moment?

JG: Well, as of yesterday, the four Great Offices of State [Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary and Prime Minister] have all got men in them, apart from the PM. So I think we've got a long way to go. And we've still got a long way to go in Parliament. Government and Parliament needs to represent modern Britain. It's not just about gender, it's much more profound than that on the broader equalities perspective. We don't have enough disabled people in Parliament. Where's their voice in the chamber? I don't think there's a single deaf MP. Until 2017, David Blunkett still remained unique as a visually impaired MP. All of that really has to change. Then you have to say: "How do you build a pipeline?" Then you get to the parliamentary fund that's there to help more diverse candidates. Maybe that fund didn't work as effectively as it could have done but let's learn from how other countries are doing it.

It's about confronting issues and then taking decisions about getting over them. What's it going to take and are you prepared to do that? I happen to think on diversity and equality it's just fundamental, and that's why I'm doing the [Social Mobility Pledge](#). Whether you're a company or a country, if you don't fish in the breadth of talent that our country has, and that means everyone, don't expect to be as successful as other organisations and countries that do.

DT: What are your reflections on the Brexit campaign and the aftermath? What changed in government afterwards?

JG: The campaign itself was what it was. I think people probably won't look back on it and say that it was democracy's best. I didn't enjoy being involved in the campaign. We were talking about a complex issue that was long term, and it was hard to get some of the more complex issues across the choices. You practically needed a PhD on the European Union to know what a customs union is. That's not a criticism, that's just a simple fact. You're talking about quite complex governance that people were being asked to make a decision on.

Obviously there was a huge political aftermath to it that inevitably took time. People were in different roles. Because no preparation had been done before for one of the two outcomes, that preparation had to start. At the time, there was a lot of discussion about whether the result would be respected, because it was quite close. So there was a huge amount on how to manage what had been a very divisive campaign because of the nature of the binary question people were posed. There was an awful lot of that to confront. I think everyone did their best in government and in the governing party at the time, a Conservative party.

DT: What changed in Cabinet after the result?

JG: People for a start. Change of Prime Minister. A change of priorities in a way, driven from what the Prime Minister was interested in. The change really came from the different teams and a PM that had Number 10 run in a different way to Cameron. So people had to adapt to quite a different workplace and find their way to work in new teams.

DT: What was the difference in the way that Theresa May ran Number 10?

JG: I felt in Cabinet we had much fuller discussions. Partly because of the Coalition that Cameron led, often the more difficult discussions had been had offline before Cabinet. So Cabinet really was about us talking through issues and, for the most part, agreeing on a direction forward because tough stuff had been already sorted out. For a Conservative government, we're able to have more broad-based discussions under Theresa May. I think she was happy for us to do that.

Then of course the Government had to get on with the job of working through how to deliver on the referendum result. For me in Education, I was much less day to day involved in it from a policy perspective. Other than the recognition of qualifications and teaching workforce, predominantly no, education is not an EU issue, it's at the national level. So I was less involved in the cabinet committees. Although I felt, given we have cabinet government, that was a risk because if you want cabinet government to work then everyone in the Cabinet needs to feel accountable for collective decision making. So you naturally want to be able to properly feed into that collective decision making.

DT: And you didn't feel you had the chance to do that?

JG: I think we all appreciated that a lot of legwork had to be done in advance. We did have the chance to shape things. The challenge was really in those more broad-based discussions about: what does a good version of Brexit look like? How do you deliver it? What does it mean for timelines? How are you going to ensure that you still deliver the rest of the day-to-day government and the strategic domestic agenda? Given that you've got this ginormous project. What does it mean for Parliament? What does it mean for bills? People rapidly tried to work through all of that but it was done within the individual departments concerned. I think it might have been sensible to have more discussions with the whole Cabinet about overall strategy.

DT: Why do you think that didn't happen?

JG: Because it was often done through Brexit departments. The assumption there is that if your department is less involved in Brexit that somehow you should have less of a say on it. But with Cabinet collective responsibility, I don't think that's necessarily wise, if you want all Cabinet ministers to feel that they can hand on heart say that they're happy with something that's so overwhelmingly important for the future of the country.

DT: What achievements are you proudest of as Secretary of State?

JG: I think in Education, it was the Social Mobility Action Plan which has the potential to be transformational. In DfID, it was almost certainly Ebola and the Syria response, getting hundreds and thousands of kids into school. In the Department for Transport, it was nailing the Olympics and making sure that our department helped make that a really successful moment for our country.

DT: What advice would you give to new ministers about implementing policy?

JG: I would say policy on its own is not enough. If it doesn't have a strategy, doesn't have an implementation plan, if you don't know how you're going to transition from where you've been to where you're going to, if you don't know how you're going to track that day to day and if you don't have the wherewithal to know that you've got the capacity in your team to deliver on all of those things I've just mentioned, then don't be surprised when it doesn't go well.

This is a ginormous, wholesale reform of government that is required in my personal view. There needs to be much more standardisation of business cases across the piece; much more standardisation of how we assess risk; more standardisation of how we track projects and how they're tracked at a macro level across government that goes way beyond the Major Projects Authority; more systematic evaluation of ensuring that ministers have the capacities that they need to balance what are hugely competing priorities on their time as ministers but also as local MPs and in Parliament; and proper reporting up to Number 10. At the heart of all of this is better evidence and data to drive policy making, starting in the Treasury with better sense of value and value over a longer time frame. So budget planning over probably 10, maybe even 15 years if possible, not just five. Maybe reform of the OBR [Office for Budget Responsibility] to really look at scenarios and longer planning time horizons if that's possible. A fundamental reform beyond what's already happened with the Green Book on valuation of human capital. A massive amount to be honest.

DT: What do you mean by ministerial capacity? Is that about ministers being trained? Is it about being staffed in different ways?

JG: The amazing thing about our democracy is a member of the public can get elected and then they end up running a department. In a sense, that's its strength because you get this fresh, 'Joe public' view on what's needed for the public. But it's that classic issue. I wasn't perfect but the key is being aware of where your weaknesses are and what you're not good at, and then the steps to plug those and in your team as well. Everyone's got strengths and weaknesses, everyone brings different things. But I think we need a better sense of the capacity of ministerial teams and departments to be able to deliver on the projects that they're being asked to deliver on.

When I went into the DfE, I felt the department was doing 30% too much. Everyone was stretched already, before you even look at some of the additional challenges of Brexit and some of the things the new Government under Theresa May suddenly wanted to also do. So it's this practical understanding of we can't do everything, you do have to prioritise and if you want your priorities you have to take out some other ones. How do you do that? Don't keep loading it up as if it's an infinite resource, because it's not. If that is how you want to deliver, you want to keep doing that, expect something to fall over somewhere else eventually. Because you haven't taken the decision on what you're deprioritising.

DT: It's quite hard to deprioritise things in government, isn't it?

JG: Absolutely. They always like announcing new things.

DT: So were you able to do that at the DfE then?

JG: We were in the process of doing it, yes. I think it's important for staff who need to know priorities. It gets increasingly confusing when you never quite stop adding. A lot of the time it's rationalisation and just being clear how things group together. Ministers like announcing individual projects, but they may or may not add up to an overall strategy. When civil servants are clear on what the overall ambition is, then they themselves can see how these things fit in. They can see where the crossovers are. They can start to make sure that rather than it being duplication, you can leverage from the different pots of money and actually make them work collectively. That again then comes down to having a civil service that understands what the overall mission is for a minister and can then come back and say: "We think this is how you might bundle it up a bit more effectively."

A lot of it comes down to simply, where are the FTEs [full-time equivalents] in your headcount? Often if you are asked to go through a prioritisation exercise, what you'll be confronted with is where the pots of money are. That's part of it. The other big part of it is, where are the people working? Have we got their brains and their energies on the priorities? Sometimes you can change the money but the teams stay. So you have to watch out for that as well. Because if the team stays, then eventually it will be starting to do submissions about what it wants to do.

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