Ministers Reflect: getting things done as a junior minister

Anyone who has read Chris Mullin’s *A View from the Foothills* – his account of his time as a Labour minister (1999–2005) – will recall his strong (and perhaps surprising) conviction that he could have achieved more as a back-bencher than a junior minister – a “minister for paperclips”, as he put it.

Certainly, a number of former junior ministers we interviewed for our Ministers Reflect archive expressed frustration at the constraints of the role. Lord Marland, for instance, found the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) so “grossly overloaded with ministers” that each one had only “a very small portfolio of stuff.” Feeling that his intellectual property brief was unfulfilling and “sorted ... quite quickly”, he soon resigned.

While for Nick Harvey, both the secretaries of state he served under in the Ministry of Defence “gave every impression that they found other ministers in their department a slightly tiresome extra they could have well done without”. And even a former secretary of state, Caroline Spelman, conceded that after the forest sell-off controversy she lost trust in her junior ministers and scaled back their autonomy.

But the interviews in our archive also point to two areas where junior ministers believed they made a marked contribution:

1. **Driving the delivery of flagship government policies.** Junior ministers felt they were often better placed than their secretaries of state to guide the implementation of key policies by having more time to devote to bringing external stakeholders on board, communicate with Parliamentary colleagues, and monitor progress. Hugh Robertson, for instance, led the day-to-day delivery of the London 2012 Olympics (also detailed in our Making the Games report).

In other cases, junior ministers who already possessed specialist knowledge of their brief when entering office often found their secretaries of state treated them as a welcome asset. Economist Steve Webb enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy in delivering pensions reform, while trade ministers Lord Green and Lord Livingston – both of whom had had long careers in business – were given a fairly free reign to pursue the Government’s export agenda.

2. **Carving out and delivering their own policy agendas.** It’s not easy for junior ministers to pursue their own policy priorities. As Mark Hoban reflected:

“I think one of the challenges for junior ministers is there are priorities that are set out by your boss but there are things that you might want to do that perhaps aren’t on his radar screen, perhaps slightly neglected, that you feel actually can be promoted and tackled.”

But many were surprised at how much it was still possible to achieve. For instance, despite legalisation of same-sex marriage never featuring in the Coalition Agreement, Lynne Featherstone made it an early priority in her role as equalities minister. She credits her success in changing the law with having “absolute clarity” on what she wanted to achieve, communicating this to civil servants, and building allies across government. Jo Swinson similarly succeeded in implementing shared parental leave – a policy she had campaigned for in opposition.

**The difference a coalition makes**

Coalition government, of course, added a unique dynamic. While there were junior ministers who likened working in mixed-party ministerial teams to operating “behind enemy lines” (Nick Harvey) or “lead[ing] an insurgency” (Lynne Featherstone), many others credited it with giving them more autonomy to get things done. As Steve Webb recalled: “I was in a far more powerful position as a Lib Dem in the Coalition in the department than I would have been if I’d been a Conservative doing exactly the same job.”

Typically, those serving under secretaries of state of a different party enjoyed unparalleled access to the Quad (an executive committee that operated during the Coalition Government comprising the two party leaders, the (Conservative) Chancellor and (Liberal Democrat) Treasury Chief Secretary). For instance, David Willetts – the Conservative Minister of State for Universities and Science within the Liberal Democrat-led BIS – was made a Cabinet minister in anticipation of party differences over university financing. This meant “there was a legitimate line of communication from [Willetts] to the Chancellor and the PM in extremis”. Willetts was able to leverage this relationship and protect the science budget through direct negotiations with the Treasury that by-passed the department.

**What does it take to succeed?**
What will help today’s cohort of junior ministers thrive in their roles? The interviews in *Ministers Reflect* offer a number of insights:

- As Andrew Mitchell [17] put it, “the route to enjoyment as a junior minister is to find an area where you can drive forward the policy and where you’re not always having to report to the secretary of state.” This requires a secretary of state who is able to recognise individual strengths, delegate responsibility, and resist the urge to micro-manage.
- Ministerial teams function best, as Mark Prisk [18] observes, when secretaries of state see themselves as “team leaders”, maintain constant dialogue through regular meetings, and allow junior ministers to be the public face of specific initiatives.
- “Less chopping and changing of ministers in the mid-term” was also seen as critical to enabling junior ministers to deliver on the ground (Nick Harvey [5]) – a point the Institute has made [19] in the past. Many regretted not having the opportunity to finish what they started.

As our archive shows, it’s possible to be much more than a “minister for paperclips”. But in order to deliver real change, junior ministers need the right support to thrive.