

Ministers reflect

Lord Livingston



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Biographical details

House of Lords

2013-present: Conservative Member

Parliamentary Career

2013-2015: Minister of State for Trade and Investment (Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for Business, Skills and Innovation)

Lord Livingston was interviewed by Jen Gold and Catherine Haddon on 7th July 2015 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project

Jen Gold (JG): Thinking back to when you first started as a minister, what was your experience of coming into government like?

Lord Livingston: Well, I was pretty unusual. First of all, I came straight from the private sector, so unusual. And secondly, I had that most strange thing in government at my insistence: a transition period. Most governmental changes are not pre-planned. Stephen Green, my predecessor, announced he was going to go in December, late November or early December. Whilst they were keen that I maybe started earlier, because Stephen's announcement was already out there, I said, 'No, let's take it to December.' And that allowed me to have some time in the backbenches but also spend time meeting people.

So when I came in, A, because my job was obviously trade and investment, I had come in with a knowledge from the outside world and, B, because actually I'd met with a lot of people and that meant that I was able to hit the ground somewhat quicker running than... 'By the way, you're the new minister this afternoon'. So that was very fortunate and it had to be because actually, effectively, at T-minus one week I was on a trade mission with the Prime Minister to China as Trade Minister Designate because Stephen [Green] was at the WTO [World Trade Organisation] and he had to be the official one for that. So I was... you came in, you were very quick, but it was very helpful having a transition and a luxury that is not afforded to virtually any other minister. But it was the strange nature of the role.

But there's two things that you have to get used to if you're coming into the Lords: one is becoming a minister, the second is being a member of the House of Lords. What you have to do, but also being at the despatch box, speaking in debates. Again, most MPs have plenty of time because they're a back bencher for four, five, six, seven, eight, ten, twenty years or whatever and then when they move to the front bench they've seen it all before. I was doing it within a month or two and I had seen other ministers whose maiden speech is in a debate. And I see them answering their first question and they've never seen it before and they don't know what to do and you never get a second chance to make a first impression.

So it's tough. I was very fortunate but I could see a lot of pit-holes because it's a very, very new world to get used to, particularly if you've been a chief executive in the past and that's a big move over.

CH: What was the big difference for you? Because you mentioned, I think, before that you'd done a lot of public speaking and so forth?

LL: Yes.

Catherine Haddon: But how was it so different?

LL: Yes, I'm used to [public speaking], and without giving it a second thought, I could stand up and speak to 2,000 people for 30 minutes without a problem, but when you stand up in the House of Lords and you can see the dent on the desk where Churchill, during the war, used to bang his ring down - and the House of Lords is much bigger than the House of Commons as well. One of the things that I think people - you will appreciate but most people don't appreciate - is the difference in size. It's a big chamber. But the people who are there asking you questions, I think there were three ex-trade commissioners, but the people who, from my personal childhood [who] should have TV screens around them! It was [Nigel] Lawson and [Douglas] Hurd and [Geoffrey] Howe and [Neil] Kinnock. And with most things in the House of Lords you have truly global experts on matters. So just the first time you stand up there, there's a certain sense of 'What are you doing there?' So hopefully I'm not the sort of person who thinks somehow becoming a Peer of the Realm is something that is a natural... it was a shock and a surprise to me and every time I stood up in the House of Lords it was still a shock and surprise. But it's a big chamber with people you knew from many early days as being leaders of the country and so it's the weight of Parliament.

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But by the same token, the House of Lords is wonderful if you treat it with respect. If you treat the House... if you do your work and you treat them with respect and a certain amount of humour, don't try and seek confrontation, they will be tremendous. And they were, I've got to say, wonderful with me [for], questions, debates on both sides of the House.

JG: And what sort of support was available to you?

LL: Well, whilst there is a Parly [Parliamentary] Unit in the department, one of the problems also is that the focus is very much of supporting the Commons. And for some officials, the Lords is a foreign country. They don't know. It's different. They don't know the background. They don't know how they do things. So I think the support for the House of Lords is less.

Secondly, your average Lords minister, it's a bit different from me because I was reasonably focused on what I did. But your average Lords minister has to cover effectively what the secretary of state has to cover in the Commons i.e. the whole department. So you've got whoever represents the Foreign Office having to answer questions in the same day on Iraq and on Burma. Or the same with the Business Minister or the Treasury Minister, from taxation through to infrastructure. And so there's... the width of knowledge you have to have in the Lords is... And again, you've got this expertise thing – there will be invariably an ex-secretary of state who stands up and makes a statement with a certain degree of factual authority about how things were and why it was in this way. There's invariably someone who wrote the Act that you're talking about there.

So, on one hand, the support isn't as strong for the Lords. On the other hand, actually the knowledge that you need, you can't get away with winging it in the Lords because they know and they will react. They really respect if you know your subject. They don't take prisoners if you don't. And so it's almost you've got the input less and requirement's higher, I think. Yes, it's less confrontational but it doesn't stop you having to know your information.

So I think one of the things I would say, probably in the Civil Service getting people who are supporting Parly Units to actually sit in the Lords, just to see what's happening. A number of them who had prepared answers to oral questions and I said, 'Well you can't quote this way'. I said, 'Have you been to an oral question?' 'No' 'Go to the next one and imagine you're standing up and you're giving that answer and you'll understand why it's wrong, why you just can't say that and know you can't do it in that way'. And so that's a problem. Officialdom is quite Commons-orientated, for the reason that the majority of ministers are in the Commons.

JG: How would you describe the main roles and duties of a Lords minister because it's obviously slightly different from the Commons experience?

LL: First, as I said, there tends to be a wider brief for most Lords ministers because they often have to look after the whole department or a very large chunk of it.

Secondly, there are questions every day for the Lords ministers which there isn't [in the Commons]. Business questions in the Commons will be a certain date. [In the Lords] you can be involved in answering questions, three, four days a week for some of the ministers. I have seen some ministers who've had to answer three questions on completely different subjects in the same day. I've never seen them go for a clean sweep.

And I was about to say the other thing is the necessity of steering legislative changes. The Lords at its best, and often it is at its best, is a very good revising chamber. But again, a level of detail as opposed to a party political positioning. I think Lords have to be greater technocrats because they will have lots of technocrats around and the Lords will reject party tribalism if you're wrong and will give you a lot of leeway if you are right and is prepared to listen and answer and engage. And that is very different. Whereas I think the Commons largely just steer the thing through. Keep the support of your own party and that's that. Actually people are quite persuadable in the Lords if you set your case. So the requirement when you're steering legislation to be more of a technocrat is higher. I didn't have any Bills. I had some where there was some clauses that I was looking at in my area, but I could see, and from one

removed, very much the need to engage in a very technocratic process with people.

CH: You mentioned technocratic process, but did you see in the Department, did you have any what we might call, executive functions? Was there anything that you were managing there?

LL: Well, yes, because as Minister of Trade and Investment I had UK Trade and Investment under me – UKTI - UK export finance and also trade policy. So that was the key areas of focus. I was dual-headed in terms of departments; I was in the FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] and BIS [Department for Business Innovation and Skills].

CH: Did you take an interest in the department in terms of how it was functioning because you've got obviously a lot of experience at running things?

LL: To some degree. But because, again, I was in two departments, I was a half-minister in both. So I sometimes would go to [meetings] when I was around, but the other problem for me was I wasn't in the country a lot. I think I visited 40 countries in 18 months. And given I couldn't, in the last two months, because of Purdah that gives you an idea. But when I was there I'd go, for instance, to the BIS board meetings and give input. But I can't say I was hugely involved. And I couldn't be hugely involved just because I physically wasn't there.

JG: Given the diversity of your role and the amount you were travelling, it might be a slightly difficult question to answer, but in terms of the day-to-day reality of being a minister, how was most of your time was spent?

LL: Most of my time was spent travelling. Speeches, meeting ministers in other countries, inward investors and UK exporters. If you take just the first three months of this year, I think I was at home one weekend, one full weekend I had at home. But I was in, I think from memory, India, China, Japan, South Korea, Latvia, Turkey, Sweden, Belgium to give you an idea. Each of those days would involve very long days; speeches, chambers of commerce, meeting foreign businesses investing in the UK, British businesses and exporters and one-to-ones with ministers. So I would say 50% of my time was probably travelling abroad, another 15% was travelling around the UK because I visited every region of the UK twice a year – so roughly three times-ish in the time I was there.

So when you're actually physically in London, which wasn't that often, it was split between parliamentary activity which, I guess, would take up 20% of the time. I probably will not come to 100% on this. And Cabinet and Sub-Cabinet meetings probably took up 10% time. And then meeting with other businesses, other ministers, interest groups etc. would probably take up 35% of the time. And then answering written questions, letters etc. probably took up 25%, 30% of my time.

JG: I understand you had an office in both BIS and FCO?

LL: Yes.

JG: How did that function?

LL: Two days a week in each.

JG: Okay, so you tried to divide it equally?

LL: Yes.

CH: Offices were able to communicate with each other well in terms of managing your time?

LL: Well it was the same people. They physically moved from one to the other. It's not that far from BIS to FCO. It isn't that far. I used to do Monday, Tuesday in BIS, Wednesday, Thursday in the Foreign Office and Friday I was off on the regional trips or, if I was in, I'd be in for a particular reason so I would go wherever.

JG: Was there anything that took you by particular surprise in those first few weeks being a minister?

LL: The technology, or lack thereof. Having come from BT, particularly into government, I went back about 15 years in terms of the technological capability. And I had become very digital, very little paper. I suddenly found a huge shift back to paper and with the quality of technology that was pretty appalling.

CH: Can you talk us through the details of it because obviously people throw that around. Was it the speed of the systems or...?

LL: Well, ability to access when you're mobile. I was travelling so much, so trying to access things was really, really difficult. Not really having a thought-through process. From their point of view for security they did not to send things electronically, as if paper was safe. At BT you encrypted stuff etc. And I know encryption can be broken, and there'd be certain stuff, of course, that's high security material that you would not do. But for most things, if somebody's going to the effort of breaking encryption to get the minutes of a subcommittee on trade... The thought that a paper, a piece of paper which is done, of course, on a computer in the first place and then sent around, how many times do you hear of people getting things stolen and the computer's fine because it was locked down but every other piece of paper is taken? So it was an attitude that just felt like a decade ago. And partially because of old contracts, the whole way it was managed was not up to date. The technology was not up to date.

We went through a major refresh when I was there. And I was without emails for the best part of two or three weeks because when it was done, people hadn't worked out the server capacity and things like that. It'd take two weeks to do a new server whereas BT would take half an hour. It was how to stop people bringing their own devices, yet the way most people operate today, it's how to help them do it because they're going to do it in one way or another. So it was just like a decade ago, 15 years ago, in terms of approach and the technological capabilities. And the contractual structure with third parties, it wasn't that it was cheap. People were paying a lot... The devices were, maybe, Windows XP or something. I'd come from Windows 8. I used to write on the screen, send it back, be able to access it anywhere with good security so that was a big shock. And things like just being able to access my own diary. I operated on a single diary [at BT] where my secretary and I would have just accessed it, changed things etc. But the system couldn't cope with that. Everything had to be mirrored and replicated. So that added to the timescales.

Daft things like getting cars were such a pain in the neck. Quite rightly, they sort of stopped every minister having their own car and moved away from that. But it was hard work. The number of times people didn't turn up, it was just difficult to do. I learnt to walk a lot more.

Also things like, when we came into government, everything went second class rail. I understand why that was the right thing to say but, truth be told, if you're having to work, it was pretty difficult when you're working and that's the only time you've got to read stuff. One of the best pieces of advice I had from one of my predecessors, he said, 'Put £10,000 [of your own money] aside when you go into government and just spend it on upgrades'. And he said, 'And just don't think about it being your money, it will only upset you, just do it!' It just meant if you've finished at the end of a really long day, you've got three hours travelling back on the train, and you've got a box to do, how the heck are you going to do it if you can't physically open the thing? So I'm not entirely sure it was the right equation. So I just... I was an unpaid minister so [that] just added to the list of 'sod it'. So that was also difficult.

The other thing I found strange and difficult was the approach which – that wouldn't have happened in business, it certainly didn't happen in BT – was if you had a month to do something it would be done at official level for 30 days and then overnight by the minister. Rather than actually give the minister time,

everything was an overnight. You're getting it at 11 o'clock at night from a plane and it would be, 'Here's your two or three hours of reading'. I had to really push people back to say, 'Look, no, why don't you give me stuff on a Friday? It gives me the weekend to go through it for next week.' I was apparently quite strange, I actually read all my stuff which some people liked a lot and some people, I suspect, liked less because I'm a stickler for quality and some people were very good and some people weren't. Do you want to carry on things that were different or do you want to go onto something else?

CH: You've sort of hinted at it, but what were your motivations for wanting to be a minister? And what were your priorities?

LL: So I didn't want to be a minister. I had never had any ambition, any desire, any expectation to be a minister. I became a minister for the simple reason that the Prime Minister asked me. I remember the conversation well. I'd dealt with the Prime Minister a bit in business but I'd no personal relationship. I wasn't even a member of the Conservative Party. I had a chat at dinner with a senior civil servant who said to me, 'What have you thought about doing after you finish at BT?' I said, 'Well, I'm still at BT, I don't intend to... I'm carrying on at BT'. And he said, 'Have you thought of going into government?' And I said, 'No'. The next day he called me and he said, 'Would you like to see the Prime Minister?' Which is not one of those questions to which the answer is no! I said yes, thinking in my mind, next month. He said, 'Tomorrow at four o'clock'.

I went to see the Prime Minister and he said 'There's something I'd like you to do'. He said, 'It's unpaid. I can only guarantee it for 18 months [because of the] election' – that was a good start! And he said, 'But it's really important for the country'. Now, I'm a fourth generation immigrant. My grandfather was born, well, you've probably never heard of it, in the Gorbals in Glasgow, which is one of the roughest places in Glasgow. My dad was the first person [in the family] to go to university. The Prime Minister says something's important. So I went home and said to my wife, 'I had a strange conversation today'. And that was that.

I mentioned other reasons why I was different: so I didn't go into government with a political ambition. I went into government in order to help Britain's inward investment and exports. And, therefore, I framed what I did by that rather than a political... I support and wanted the Conservative Party to be re-elected but it wasn't because I wanted to be a Cabinet Minister. I wanted to do something else.

CH: Had you set yourself any sort of tangible priorities or achievements that you wanted to get in policy terms?

LL: Well, there were a few things fairly early on. For a start, medium-sized businesses in the UK. We have got some great big businesses and we're actually doing reasonably well, in fact, in start-ups, we're seen as a start-up hub. Medium-sized businesses in the UK perform quite poorly compared to Germany and Italy and France, the sort of family specialist. So I saw them as being somewhere... the CBI [Confederation of British Industry] talk about them being the 'forgotten middle'. So I felt that they needed a lot more help and assistance because they do get missed out.

Helping more businesses to think about exporting and getting them started. And also UK export finance. About 20 or 30 years ago, a government, I don't even know which colour, in its infinite wisdom decided that small companies didn't need any help with export finance because the banks would do it. And if that were ever true it certainly isn't today. We just got ourselves in a situation where many businesses wouldn't even think about exporting because if they went to a local branch of Barclays and said, 'I'd like a performance bond for Kazakhstan?' I think the manager would go running. And, therefore we... on the one hand, UK export finance was truly the global leader in aircraft financing and multibillion deals. It was helping 30 companies a year. And it's now helping hundreds and hopefully we'll get into thousands. So it's doubled, in the 18 months I was there it doubled the number of companies it helped from a couple of hundred to four or five hundred. It's gone on to redouble and redouble again. But that was really important because finance was just causing people not even to think about exporting.

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Also, to make the department more efficient and effective, get us linked up with other government departments more strongly. But I was conscious also it was 18 months before an election and doing major structural change in that period is quite difficult because handbrake turns aren't good. And if a new government came in, it wasn't a given it would definitely be a Conservative government, [you would have] thrown everything up in the air for someone else to throw it up in the air. So I concentrated more on improvements and better execution, better focus rather than structural change.

I also had the unfortunate situation that most of my senior team left around the time I came which was not, I stress, I believe, because of me. I was told the week before I was joining, the Head of UKTI had resigned which came as a real shock to me. And that they'd agreed that the senior civil servant concerned had decided he could go pretty much immediately which is not the decision I would have come to.

But one of the things on the list of things that you get used to is you don't make the people decisions, the Civil Service do, for reasons I understand about politicising the Civil Service. But, actually, the biggest way to change an organisation is people. If you can't choose the people or choose when they leave or choose how they come or choose them before; that takes away a pretty important bit of the puzzle. I'd just been told when I arrived that the Head of UKTI was leaving and they'd agreed he could leave in a couple of weeks. Just appalling – it just showed a certain dysfunction. And there were a lot of other people who were going. It seemed to be I caught a wave of everything changing. If I take sort of a month before to a couple of months after I joined, I think we lost the Head of UKTI, the Finance Director of UKTI, shortly after, the CEO of UKTI, I think, the Head of Press; just all around. And that made it very difficult. First of all you have to recruit people. So it was a sort of, to quote the cliché, changing the engines on a 747 mid-flight. It was quite tricky.

JG: I wonder if you could just talk us through an occasion where an unexpected event or crisis hit the department – obviously in your case it could be either department – and how you went about dealing with it?

LL: I'm trying to think, crisis...

JG: It could just be an unexpected event, wider events that you had to suddenly contend with.

LL: What you certainly had was unexpected events in terms of... you just take the first thing, the Prime Minister's trip to China. If you want a PhD in trying to arrange things, trying on one side to deal with the Chinese Government and Number 10, because these are two extremely large and extremely moving targets and trying to align them at a point where you're taking a jumbo-jet full of people. To an extent, we didn't know the day before which city we were going to start with, or whether we were going to Beijing or Shanghai on the Sunday. So certainly having people on the team, and there were a lot of really good people, who were able to absorb that degree of unexpected complexity was really important.

I'm trying to think. I'm sure there was a number of crises and if they occur after I'll probably tell you. But you just had a lot of... when Number 10 would suddenly decide they wanted to do something with very short notice, or you need to stand in. That happened quite often. So certainly one of the things I found was the ability to control your own diary was pretty limited because, as someone well before me, well before the current Prime Minister said, 'Events, dear boy, events'. You do move things around quite a bit.

JG: And if you had to highlight just one achievement that you consider greatest achievement in office?

LL: I hate that word achievement. I think I said earlier that there's a number of things I think changed. I think, certainly UKTI got a lot better, both recognition and belief. It's nicely... I remember John Cridland [Director General of the CBI] was asked at a CBI conference: 'Five years ago you said that UKTI was like Marmite, people like it or hate it. Is that still your view?' He said, 'No, no, no. It's not Marmite now, no, it's actually [better]. But recognition remains a problem.' And that's absolutely right.

But I think we did make both the change in the recognition of UKTI and UKEF [UK Export Finance]. UKTI helped more than 50,000 companies in the last 12 months I was there. Four years before it was 27,000. So we basically doubled both UKTI and UKEF number of companies we helped.

I think our success in inward investment was really good. But exports didn't really increase. And that was the downside bit. So if you ask me what's the one thing that I really wish we'd done and that's we didn't make the impact on exports. There's for a whole load of external reasons why that was the case. But we did really well with inward investment. And the trade deficit went down significantly but exports didn't grow in the way that you'd want.

CH: You mentioned as well, you wanted to help the relationships between the departments work better and how things related to other departments. What were your reflections on how government departments worked with each other and how the policy process worked?

LL: One of the most... Jeremy Heywood [the Cabinet Secretary] is great and a really important part of making it work between departments. Ministers shouldn't believe that, outside the Prime Minister and possibly the Chancellor, they can always get other departments to do what they need. Jeremy Heywood usually can. So one of my principles is working with Jeremy was a really important part of getting government departments to work together. So I think utilising the command structure in the Civil Service was a really important part rather than thinking that you as a minister, particularly six months running up to election, are really going to make that much of a difference.

I found the number of departments, I would say there were exceptions, and I'm not going to say who, but they were the exceptions rather than the rule – for the most part, actually when you asked people to do things for exports, they would try to help. As I said, [there were] some exceptions. And that was true not just in departments but also around British industry, institutions etc. I think one of the things is that the... I think businesses etc. want to back Britain not just themselves. We just don't probably, in government, ask enough of goodwill of people to help. I found that was it was remarkable, by asking people, what you could get them to do, to get behind the export effort.

But I found government, generally, if you worked through the Civil Service structure you could get things done. As I said, there were irritating exceptions who would always find a reason not to and possibly not at the speed you wanted. But I think we did start to see in areas such as Food, Education, Health, Defence, Home Office, Security, really good support for our export efforts in these areas, just to name some. And I know I'll get into trouble because there'll be departments that I haven't mentioned, but they were certainly some of the top-of-mind ones.

JG: And within the departments you were working in, how did you establish effective working relationships with the Secretaries of State?

LL: Well what was interesting is the two departments certainly worked very differently. With very different but both very approachable Secretaries of State. The Foreign Office definitely worked on a... it was very hierarchical and very much in the old traditional style where virtually every decision ended up on the desk of the Foreign Secretary. I don't actually think there was too many disagreements from the Foreign Secretary but I think it probably suited the Perm[anent] Sec[retary] that they worked in that way.

On the other hand, In BIS, there was more power delegated to the individual ministers, in a way far [more] similar to how businesses run. Ministers of state are quite senior people and sometimes, I did, on more than one occasion, say, 'Are you really telling me if I want to appoint somebody to do this advisory role on this country I need the Foreign Secretary to personally approve it?' 'Yes'. And it was sort of bizarre, the concept of empowerment really wasn't big in FCO. But I've got to say William Hague – he was, for most of my time, the Foreign Secretary – he's an incredibly approachable, brilliant guy and I think people really liked working for him. But BIS was a more devolved authority structure. So two very different characters. As you got nearer to the election, things got a little bit trickier when you had one Liberal Democrat Secretary of State and one Conservative. Things got a little bit more political; who

made announcements, stuff like that.

JG: Obviously BIS had both a Liberal Democrat secretary of state and both Liberal Democrat and Conservative junior ministers in the department, did you notice for most of your time, the coalition dynamic made any difference?

LL: I was surprised by how little it made. Of course it made some difference but actually there was a very good working relationship. As I said, it became more difficult as you came up to election. But actually, the working between the Liberals and Conservatives was really good. There wasn't a big Liberal representation in FCO but there was in BIS and it worked, it worked well. People worked together well and genuinely, I think, the Coalition gave the UK more stability than anyone had a right to expect going into it. I think that showed the maturity of both sides. It didn't mean there weren't disagreements but sometimes... somebody once said, 'There's been a coalition government in the UK for the last 60 years, it's just this time there's two parties' [laughter].

JG: You touched on the technology but was there anything else that you found frustrating about being a minister?

LL: Well this sort of sense of a lack of empowerment at times. Also a lot of people had veto rights over things which meant there was a tendency to not doing things.

JG: On the political side they would veto or the Civil Service's?

LL: Both. There was a certain inertia in the system and that was... whilst at BT it wasn't always perfect, there was a big relationship between the steering wheel, the accelerator and the engine and wheels, it was not always obvious in places [in government] that there was.

I think the other thing I would say, there were some great, great officials, superb people, who worked really hard, some of the brightest and best people who would thrive in any organisation. And some of them weren't very good and didn't do a great job. And the ability to differentiate, separate, between the two was actually quite limited. That was quite frustrating. The concept of performance management and the concept of performance was something, unfortunately, that was lacking. It was a shame because it meant you really couldn't recognise the really outstanding people.

CH: You said obviously you didn't want to do big structural reform during your time, in terms of changing departments...

LL: Well, I certainly said I just felt that the time that we had to make it... because I didn't have people to lead it for the first six months, because it took me six, seven months to get a new - or it took the system - seven months to get somebody new to lead by which point we were nine months, 10 months away from an election.

CH: But did you come away with any reflections on what you thought would be the priorities for making government more effective and making it work better?

LL: Well, making my department more effective, yes.

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

LL: I think it depends on the department, to be honest. I was very fortunate, I had a huge amount of support from the PM and the Chancellor's office about what we were going to do. But that was a card that you didn't really want to play. And it also meant that you got lots and lots and lots and lots of people interested in what you were doing. It was a two-edged sword, everybody wanted to take an interest. I think there's more reviews of UKTI than you could shake a stick at. I think they were averaging once every couple of months.

A high energy level. Really being an effective minister takes the ability to absorb information, so you have [to have a] strong intellect. Some ministers were some of the smartest people I'd ever come across. From the Prime Minister down, really, really bright people. And I think that's necessary because the ability to absorb a really wide range of information on varying subjects and retain it was really important.

Decisiveness. Don't let your diary control you is really important. It took me about a couple of months to work this out, but a minister's time is something that is rarely respected by people who are outside the minister's private office and there's no point in asking the question of 'Should I do this' because they will always say 'Yes' because it's their interest area. So if you happen to be the Head of UKTI or the Consul General for a particular country, and the trade minister for that country is coming or the whoever minister, the economy minister or the oil minister, you're always going to say that every minister should meet them.. And having that very strong control of saying 'No' because otherwise you stand in deep danger of drowning if you don't, particularly if you take the engagements seriously which I did.

I think it depends. There are different skill sets needed in different roles as well. I think it's presence, decisiveness, ability to work across departments. Number 10, Number 11 and Cabinet Office, are really important because they're the hub of everything and you need to make sure that's dealt with.

JG: And if you were speaking to a new minister today going into office would there be any particular advice you would offer them?

LL: Well, certainly. It depends what the background is and I'm not going to tell somebody who's frankly gone through the ranks of being PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary] to junior minister. But somebody coming from outside into the Lords and I have chatted through with some who are in that position, I think this issue about your diary, getting control of that very early. Being pretty strident about your private office, that's the only group of people you can employ and if they're not good and committed then you've got a really big problem.

Working out your key stakeholders outside government. In business you have something called 'RACI' which is 'Responsible, Accountable, Consult or Inform'. It defines what role people play in things. You've got to understand that in government, the number of people who need to be consulted are huge and you've got to understand that and understand ways to work through.

I'd certainly say to any Lords minister take some time out to watch what happens in the Lords. One senior political figure from the opposition said to me in my early days, I knew him, I knew quite a few people from the Lords, he came up to me and he said, 'The thing you've got to realise about the Lords: self-deprecation and flattery'. He said, 'That's the things that will get you through'. And as he said that, somebody passed and he said, 'Ah, have you met Lord Such and Such, one of the finest legal minds in the whole of the country' [laughter]. And he was right because actually most of the people in the Lords deserve respect because they've actually done things, and if you treat them... I would say there's a particular peculiarity about the Lords; you get that wrong and they can make your life really quite difficult.

JG: And in hindsight, would you have approached the role differently at all?

LL: Probably. Well, the people side of things, had I realised that I would not have a management team for the beginning, had I known what I knew after I accepted, a few weeks before which, to be honest, nobody knew, apart from one or two people who didn't tell me, I would have absolutely insisted about the getting in quickly the right team and not letting the process let me down. So I think... know, your own team, because I had this executive function, UKTI, it's like running businesses and if you've got the wrong people running businesses or not having anyone running businesses that's a real problem and there was a lot of gaps in it. And I think that would have allowed me to make change quicker.

CH: On that part, you've talked a lot about UKTI, but what about permanent secretaries in either department, what was their role in terms of managing and running the department? And were you able to discuss with them?

LL: Their role was to run and manage the department. I found in FCO they hadn't quite got the hang that I was a minister in the FCO. I think FCO in particular was about supporting the Foreign Secretary and everything else was just...

Slightly different, again, in BIS. It operated slightly differently, but helpful and supportive when asked. I didn't really get huge direct support from the Perm Sec and because of the structure of my departments, I didn't really have policy civil servants supporting me. And that's the other thing – I didn't have a spad [special adviser] because I didn't have a political background and with the exception of trade I had very little support on policy. So my private office was trying to help and that wasn't really their role in a way. So I think the other thing I would say is, and it's very peculiar to the Trade role, you really need to have policy support.

The economic support was, for instance, poor. Getting people to analyse what was happening with trade numbers, what was going on, just couldn't. BIS analysed according to sectors and the FCO analysed according to country and if you want to know what's really happening, you have to mesh that. So I was invariably coming up and saying, 'Well, actually, what's the impact of the pound's strengthening by 10% against the dollar, that means that every time we sell oil it's worth 10% less to us in pounds because it's sold in dollars'. 'Oh no, it doesn't make...' and it took me about three months to get people convinced that actually that's exactly what it meant, and it was accounting for about 4% or 5% reduction in our trade numbers because of this translation. I was having to come up with it from my degree-level economics and also just in business guys knowing that if I'm selling something in a foreign currency and something strengthens...! So the technical policy help, I think, I would have insisted on stronger support for that. I could have got things done more quickly. Because you don't know what you don't know, you see, and you don't know what structures you need going into it.

JG: There's been a long-standing debate about the backgrounds of ministers and some have spoken very publically about having never run an organisation before and coming into ministerial positions. I'm just wondering what difference you felt your experience at BT, an incredibly large organisation, made when coming into government? How much of a help that was it?

LL: Well, that was a big help. The running the organisation bit, the trouble is you didn't have the levers that you were used to having. Your ability to change people and process in a way you could in business was different. So actually, it could have been a bigger help had I been able to exercise the levers. It's a cliché but there's quite a lot of truth in it, the minister is the chairman and the civil servant's the chief executive. So it was a bit of a change. You had a lot of the accountability but not quite some of the capabilities to get it delivered.

JG: Is there anything we haven't asked that you think's a particularly important reflection about your time as being minister?

LL: I'd just say, apart from the fact it was a great privilege to do it, I was pleased I did it but I decided that enough was enough and I wasn't going to do another two years post-election, which is probably going back to the structural change. But I think that's probably it.

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