

Ministers Reflect Lord Mandelson



18 April 2018

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2008–present: Labour Member of the House of Lords

1992–2004: Member of Parliament for Hartlepool

Government career

2009–10: First Secretary of State and Lord President of the Council (Privy Council Office) and Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills

2008–09: Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform

2004–08: European Commissioner

1999–2001: Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

1998: Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

1997–98: Minister without Portfolio

Lord Mandelson was interviewed by Dr Catherine Haddon and Daniel Thornton on 18 April 2018 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

Lord Mandelson reflects on how Blair and Brown took decisions, on ministerial misconduct and on how to be an effective minister.

Dr Catherine Haddon (CH): If we could draw your mind back to 1997, obviously you were very well-prepared in opposition for entering government, but that first role as Minister without Portfolio was a slightly unusual role to come into government with. How well prepared did you feel and what surprised you when entering government?

Lord Peter Mandelson (PM): I don't think I was typical in 1997. I had been part of the overall preparations for government but I wasn't immersed in them. I was leading on the campaign at Millbank and had been preparing that for two years. So my mindset was quite governmental, even though my primary responsibility and focus was on winning the election first.

Personally, I didn't know what I was going to do. On the day of the election, as I recounted in my own memoir, *The Third Man*, I had gone over to Sedgefield to see Mr Blair and we talked about the construction of the Cabinet, which obviously didn't include me. When it came to it, there were a number of options for me but the Prime Minister wanted me to be essentially his minister, as Minister without Portfolio in the Cabinet Office. That's what I did from that first weekend.

CH: Do you think the civil service were prepared for that kind of role?

PM: I don't know whether they were prepared for it, but as it turned out, I do think they were glad that it happened. The senior civil service wanted, from the word go, to build as many bridges and channels into Number 10 as possible and I was a good hook into the Prime Minister's operation.

It was a huge change. This is a Labour government after 18 years [of Conservative government]. It was such a huge unknown. And although the civil servants were familiar with Tony Blair and Jonathan Powell and some of the other people around him, you don't know how people are going to behave, what their attitude is going to be until you actually get going.

There was then immediately a falling out over how Number 10 should be organised and over the appointment of Jonathan as Chief of Staff and his status and the Order in Council which empowered him to give direct instructions to civil servants. Jonathan had his Order and Alastair [Campbell] wanted his Order too so as to be level pegging. This was quite a departure for the Cabinet Secretary and his colleagues. It needed a lot of subsequent smoothing over. I helped do that because I had one foot in Number 10 through my relationship with the Prime Minister, and the other in the Cabinet Office. I

started building a relationship with Robin Butler [then Cabinet Secretary]. I saw him every week and I think I helped mend what had been, in the first instance, a bit of a breach between him and the Prime Minister.

CH: Yes, you've spoken about that a few times since. What support did you have in that time? Were you just using the machinery of Number 10 or did you have personal support?

PM: No, I couldn't use the machinery of Number 10. I had to establish my own operation in the Cabinet Office. I wanted to bring in my Executive Assistant, Ben Wegg-Prosser, who had been working with me prior to the election. He was a very able individual who, 20 years on, I have ended up working for in a sense because he's the Managing Director of the business that we created together – I am Chair, he's the MD. But we started out together in 1995 when he came straight from university and I was his first employer at the Labour Party. I wanted him to come into the Cabinet Office but I didn't have the rank or budget to have a special adviser but we found a way for him to come in. Ben was a great asset. When you have sensible grownups in government, practical people who are nice to work with and know how to treat people, who are mending fences, building bridges the whole time, it's very useful. Rather than, as some special advisers do, isolate their boss from the civil service, damage bridges and sometimes become quite rude. So they appreciated Ben.

The next question was who my Private Secretary would be. They sent along half a dozen people for me to see, none of whom I thought were ideal. Then somebody told me that the person I really needed and should get, was somebody from Michael Heseltine's private office in the Cabinet Office. So I asked to see Rupert Huxter [previously Heseltine's Private Secretary] who came in and said very politely: "Well, I feel I've done quite a lot of this stuff, working with people like you, and I think I ought to go on and find a different challenge." Which of course I understood. But he also said: "Anyway, I want to see more of my children. So if I did come and work for you, I'd like to be able to take them to school and be home to read them stories at bedtime." I liked him and his candour immediately and knew he would be good and well-connected. So I said: "Deal. You can take them to school, read to them at bedtime and I'll have you in between." And that was the arrangement and neither of us regretted it.

CH: In those early years, what were your priorities and what you were really focused on? We know what the priorities were for the Government as a whole but what were the things that you particularly wanted to get stuck into?

PM: You say we knew what the priorities were and in a sense we did, because we had our famous election pledges, but there were still competing legislative priorities in government. I was working with Number 10 on these and my role was essentially helping the Prime Minister think through the list. There was also the question of, not simply what we were doing in what order, but how we would present it: the story we

would tell, what our key objectives were as the incoming Cabinet and why things were going to go first and second and third.

So I played a role as the co-ordinator of the presentation of government policy, the traditional Minister without Portfolio role, and I did that both in a strategic and in a day-to-day sense. I didn't much like it. I felt as if I was back in Millbank doing what I was always having to do. I wanted to move on to other areas and the area that I found most interesting was European policy. Of course, you had the International and European Secretariat located in the Cabinet Office and I saw them every week to talk through the Government's approach.

By the summer and autumn, there were two areas really I was focusing on. One was Europe and how we construct our European policy. There was always a tension between the Cabinet Office and the Foreign Office, given that European policy is not a foreign policy. It's essentially domestic policy because it impacts on almost every aspect of the Government's programme. My main liaison was between the Cabinet Office and Number 10 and in particular the PM's European policy adviser, Roger Liddle, who became very influential in policy development and in networking in Europe.

The other was a bigger thing: how do you create a stronger strategic centre for the Government? How do you build out from the Cabinet Office and marshal the resources, capability and authority to play a bigger role in driving the Government's and the Prime Minister's agenda? The aim was to not have just a co-ordinating function, not simply be a glorified telephone exchange in the Cabinet Office and set of committee rooms where ministers would meet, but be bigger than that. What form should the centre of government take? Should the Cabinet Office become a Prime Minister's department? These sorts of questions. One senior civil servant in particular I talked to about this was Terry Burns [former Permanent Secretary to the Treasury], along with Robin Butler, and we did some thinking about that for the Prime Minister. It quickly fell foul of the Treasury. The Treasury never wants to give up the central control it exercises through public spending. That was particularly accentuated in our case because you had this continuing competition between the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. So the ideas went nowhere but it absorbed quite a lot of time.

My chief memory towards the end of my time as Minister without Portfolio was the policy breakdown in the Department of Social Security over welfare reform. The Secretary of State was Harriet Harman and the Minister for Welfare Reform was Frank Field. They didn't get on or grip the policy agenda in the preparation of the green paper we were due to publish. The breakdown became so bad that I started to go into the department to chair green paper meetings along with David Miliband, the Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit. This was very unusual, that a minister should come in from outside the department and start engaging directly with civil servants. But at the time there was no alternative. We got there in the end.

There were other examples of difficult policy development. One was over the Transport green paper and then there was a big fall out over public private partnerships in transport, notably in London Transport. There was a standoff between the Treasury and John Prescott [then Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions]. There again, I remember David Miliband and I worked together but more at a distance.

CH: Was that because there were objections to the idea of you coming in?

PM: We didn't come in so directly, but they just couldn't agree. The Treasury were making ambitious and aggressive proposals and designs which John didn't like and to have a battle going on between the Chancellor and the Deputy Prime Minister was pretty difficult to handle.

CH: Commentators often talk about the speed of some of the turnover of ministers under Tony Blair but it's not actually that much higher than under his predecessors. Was that first reshuffle in July 1998 a case of trying to remodel the system of ministers to departments?

PM: No, there was a convention or rule in the party that the members of the Shadow Cabinet should become members of the first Cabinet. The PM had some degree of manoeuvre, but he also wanted to respect and give a chance to those who had worked in opposition and who therefore had an expectation of being in the Cabinet. But after a year, he felt that everyone had been road tested and there was a bit of a clear out.

CH: And of course it meant that you went to your first department.

PM: I went to the DTI [Department of Trade and Industry].

CH: Yes. How different was that having a whole department to yourself?

PM: Not just different parts of the kingdom, almost different countries. To go from the centre of government to a department, any department, requires a major gear shift. You're no longer a member of the hub, you're a spoke. You're a spoke on equal terms with all the other spokes. You're competing for your policy agenda, the Prime Minister's support, buy-in from other departments in the way that collective government operates.

I had been sent to the DTI mainly because the Prime Minister wasn't entirely happy with various directions the department was taking in some policy areas, for example, energy and employment law including trade union powers. My predecessor, Margaret Beckett had drawn up a white paper, *Fairness at Work*. There were aspects of it that the Prime Minister was worried about. One of the things I had to do was to convert that white paper into a bill and, in the process, make certain adjustments that would satisfy the Prime Minister without upsetting the applecart. I did that very quickly over the summer. I got agreement on the bill during the autumn. There were sensitive issues that we were

touching on, including a number of requests made by the trade unions which the Prime Minister felt he could not go so far in accommodating.

CH: When you went in did you feel that it was your job also to look into the department's performance as a whole and how it was working? Did you have any conversations with the Permanent Secretary about that?

PM: Immediately. The problem with the department was that it was large and had been operating too slowly. The Prime Minister wanted stronger focus and I came in with a strong agenda of my own which was to construct an industrial strategy for the country. I immediately focussed on the white paper that I wanted to draw up. I put together a team in the department to work on that. That came to fruition in [the white paper] *Building the Knowledge-Driven Economy*.

It was about bringing California to the UK. Indeed, I went off to California in September. In that trip I began to understand the ecosystem that supports the entrepreneurialism, financing, legal framework – everything that makes California, California. I wanted to bring that ecosystem, that culture, the legislative framework, the attitudes and the new ways of working together, to Britain. I wanted to build a modern knowledge-based economy, very much following in the wake of Michael Heseltine and his competitiveness white papers that he had done during his ministerial time in Trade and Industry. I saw myself as the continuum of Michael Heseltine.

I shared many of the same ideas. I was committed to a market-based economy obviously, very New Labour. But I also saw where government had a role which only government can fulfil to create the framework of policy in which business starts and thrives. Not just the supply side of the economy – getting the infrastructure right and the education and the social policies that you need – but more interventionist than that. I threw myself, for example, into creating the regional development agencies, a responsibility that I shared with John Prescott's department. We were getting along and producing blueprints and setting those up. I took on the national minimum wage and signed it into law. So there was quite a strong government agenda.

Building the Knowledge-Driven Economy provided a vision for the department, they really felt that they were centre stage, that this mattered and that we really were talking about the future of a successful economy. The department suddenly felt they were firing on all cylinders and they loved it.

Daniel Thornton (DT): Were there things that you had to negotiate with the Treasury in doing that?

PM: The Treasury were suspicious but couldn't actually construct an argument against what I was doing. The Treasury realised the Department of Trade and Industry was going to be more assertive and they were not terribly keen on that.

The only area where I really came unstuck with the Treasury was over [the] Royal Mail. The Chancellor and his staff thought that the Royal Mail needed overhauling in a major way and that I should push that forward. They suggested I was dragging my feet. Then when I took it on, they started suggesting that I had gone too far, so that was pretty difficult.

The Treasury tried to block me in one important respect. I went to Number 10 and said: "Look, I have a remit to do this, I'm delivering and the Treasury want to pull one important piece out of it. If we cannot get agreement, then I'm going to stop the entire thing." We got there.

CH: Turning to Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. It's obviously a much smaller department and a very different role, but at the same time...

PM: It was a very key and difficult moment.

CH: Exactly.

PM: The Good Friday Agreement had been made in Easter 1998 but the very next day, it was as if it was stillborn. As if all the parties had thrown so much energy into making it happen, they had exhausted themselves before being able to implement it. So for a whole year after the Good Friday Agreement, nothing happened. It didn't go anywhere. The devolution didn't happen, the decommissioning didn't start, the other elements of it. The reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, my predecessor, Mo Mowlam, had got that underway and had given responsibility for it to Chris Patten who did a very competent and comprehensive report. There were one or two other elements of the Agreement that she made progress in. But the core of it was going nowhere. This was obviously very worrying and disappointing, not least for the Prime Minister whose achievement it was chiefly.

So as ever in Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State had reached the end of their shelf life. It happens with all Northern Ireland Secretaries. You get to a point where you run out of road and it's time to move on and bring in a fresh face. There was a bit of a standoff between my predecessor, Mo Mowlam, and the Prime Minister about this, but eventually she was persuaded it would be right to leave Northern Ireland and she did just after the summer in 1999. And I went in.

The thing was teetering. Senator Mitchell, thankfully, had been brought back and asked to assist in reactivating the whole process. I worked with him to get the thing up and running and the devolved government installed before the whole process dissolved.

CH: And successfully so. Did you feel the department and the Government were well set up to tackle it by then?

PM: Oh, yes. The machinery, momentum, the relationships, the rationale. You had a very small number of civil servants who were exceptionally high quality. You also had in

Number 10, the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell who was completely immersed in the agreement from the beginning. He was really the point man for the Prime Minister on the whole negotiation. Number 10 were funny. They both knew and cared about Northern Ireland a great deal, it had become part of their DNA. But at the same time, they wanted to be freed from it. They wanted to get on and do other things. So they both wanted me to get on with doing it, not keep coming and bothering them, but to deliver and make sure it was successful. Then they would suddenly come in and micromanage, which you have to accommodate.

Of course, what happens in Northern Ireland, certainly in that period, is that the parties would look to Number 10 and the Prime Minister as a sort of Court of Appeal. If they didn't like what the Secretary of State was doing and didn't feel it was sufficiently aligned with their point of view, they would have little hesitation in saying: "The Secretary of State doesn't understand or he's getting this all wrong, he's making the wrong call on this." Nationalists and republicans would appeal to Dublin or the White House to intervene. Unionists had less outside help and this unbalanced things. So the Secretary of State is the person in the middle juggling these different players.

Then you had the security issues, being alerted to threats and developments, on both sides. You were reading intelligence most evenings, at the end of a long day, keeping ahead of that as well as the politics.

CH: I've interviewed some of the permanent secretaries of that time and they talked about the big change that they felt in their own personal security because suddenly both them and their families were coming under police protection that they'd never had in any other permanent secretary position or civil service position, how much that brought it home.

PM: Yes. But you adjusted to it. It was my first introduction to personal protection and to the professionalism of Special Branch. I had a number of difficult discussions with the Chief Constable in Northern Ireland, difficult judgement calls about what to do in various situations, but I remember only one time when I lost it. I was told at a day's notice that my Northern Ireland protection team were being reassigned and new ones were going to be put in place. I said: "Hold on a minute, I like the team I've got, I've got used to them, I think they're very good and they know me and I like their company." The Chief Constable said: "You may feel like that but they've been there long enough and now it's time for somebody new." I said: "Well, can't we talk about it?" and he said: "No." I said: "Really? I'm Secretary of State," and he said: "This is an operational matter Secretary of State." And they were duly reassigned, quite rightly.

CH: You had no choice. Sometimes that happens.

Before we turn to your later time in office, something that came up in an interview we did recently with Mark Garnier was the role of the Ministerial Code. He was trying to argue that there should be a greater amount of due process in the way in which the Ministerial Code is being used and the role of the Cabinet Office as the investigators, as it were, was inappropriate. What do you think?

PM: What's the alternative? I don't know. Unless you're going to create some whole new public agency, a statutory body responsible for the enforcement of the Ministerial Code. I don't think you want to go down that road. I think the thing works reasonably well, it is principled, it is elaborated in a way that it needs to be, without becoming encyclopaedic, but it also has a degree of realism in its application. I feel it's right. It's become more detailed over time, taking account of different things.

CH: Yes. They now have the role of Prime Minister's Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests, it's currently Alex Allan, who will do a degree of investigation.

PM: The problem is that when a minister has tripped up or suddenly been exposed by some tabloid sting or whatever, it immediately becomes huge and sensationalised and demands for beheading quickly follow.

What happens is that the Prime Minister finds himself or herself forced into a decision in order to kill the story without having all the facts properly assembled. The media people in Number 10 would be saying: "Oh god, this is a dreadful story, throw the person overboard." Somebody else would come in and say: "Hold on a moment, this is not quite how it appears. There has to be some natural justice applied here and some sort of due process." Can the Cabinet Office really be the investigating officer and judge and jury in this? Especially at the speed at which the media demands?

That's why an independent element was introduced to this, somebody who would have sufficient authority to be able to say: "Hold on, pause for thought" or "This isn't quite fair." Someone who would be able to take a detached view and insist on due process. That's how the role came about. I don't know how it works now.

CH: There is the element of delaying having to make a choice by saying there needs to be an investigation. I think the most interesting example recently was Damian Green because the investigation just went on and on and on.

PM: Yes. The Damian Green case was very interesting because the Prime Minister refused to act impulsively and insisted on all the facts being properly assembled and fully reviewed, unlike in my case when I had to leave the Government despite the efforts of the Cabinet Secretary at the time, Richard Wilson, to bring some calm and objectivity to the situation.

The mistake I made was to come out of an intensive day of political and security meetings and late in the evening doing an interview for Sky television in which something I said differed slightly from what the press office in Number 10 had said

earlier. At which moment the whole thing blew up and I was accused of misleading people. Stuff happens I am afraid, but in this case, fortunately, it was cleared up by a subsequent inquiry.

DT: I'm interested in the co-ordination mechanisms across government that you experienced. In your Minister without Portfolio phase, you mentioned the communications role that you played wasn't one you necessarily wanted. Were you in charge of the grid?

PM: Yes. We created the grid. It was a New Labour invention. Live by the grid. Die by the grid. Enforce the grid. Amend the grid. Punish those who defy the grid.

It was never ending. There was a wonderful civil servant in Number 10 who for years was in charge of the grid, Paul Brown. He became the official Grid master.

DT: Obviously there are lots of other co-ordination mechanisms. I'm interested in your perspective on cabinet committees as Secretary of State in different departments and then under Gordon Brown.

PM: I think cabinet committees didn't play a big enough role during the Labour Government. I think we lost something as a result but that's not to say we simply ran a 'sofa government.' This idea that government operated on a number of interconnected sofas, as the alternative to properly managed and conducted Cabinet government is a misrepresentation.

I understand the phrase because the Prime Minister did like to operate bilaterally with ministers through stock takes, examination of performance, and discussions in groups rather than formal committees. He was a driver and agenda setter, an educator and a progress chaser, and a quality controller. That's what Blair was. He had a very clear hierarchy in his head as to what was important, what needed to be dealt with at any particular time. On Sunday, he would write down at Chequers an assessment of his own government. Possibly half a dozen different policy areas and subjects where he thought things were not going right, were being mishandled, poorly thought through, inadequately delivered or presented. When that was issued on the Sunday evening to a dozen or so people who included senior civil servants, but in the main his policy, political and media staff, those people jumped. If it needed meetings the next day you would go in, and you would indeed sit on a chair or a sofa and you would have different areas of government activity interrogated by him. Sometimes he would want to see more people, sometimes he would want to see ministers. Most of the time he operated through the Number 10 policy staff and the private office, as any Prime Minister does, but he was definitely hands on.

The idea that he could simply wait a couple of months for a paper to be presented to a cabinet committee and discussed, possibly inconclusively, was not acceptable to him, and he was right not to govern in that way. But the casualty of it was the formal cabinet

committee system, which, when it worked well, did have an ability to collectivise decision-making and secure collective responsibility but was inevitably much slower.

There was still the system of putting decisions round Whitehall for departmental comment, obviously that was never dispensed with. It's just that he felt cabinet committees were talking shops, spending months taking minutes and not producing much as a result. And he was impatient. Quite rightly.

Of course, he also created the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, as well as the Strategy Unit in the Cabinet Office. The Delivery Unit became his main instrument. Where he was most impatient was in public service reform and delivery, and that's where the main focus of the Delivery Unit was.

DT: If we come on to the Brown years, as First Secretary of State you were on 80% of cabinet committees.

PM: I did have to do a lot of them. But these years weren't that different from the Blair years. Gordon wasn't a great believer in cabinet committees either.

As for the Cabinet itself, like Tony he wanted it over and done with as quickly as possible. Aren't all Prime Ministers like that, disliking endless discussion in which every view has been expressed or repeated by every person round the table?

CH: It depends on their use of it. Wilson used to let the Cabinet have their discussion but that was really to let people let off steam. Thatcher would use them but in order to explain to everyone...

PM: What she wanted was to give them their marching orders. And she wanted a rubber stamp.

DT: Apparently Theresa May lets discussion run more than Cameron, sometimes Cabinet meetings overrun.

PM: You have to do that if you have conflicts and fault lines running through your Cabinet the whole time as she does.

Under Harold [Wilson], there was more of a left-right fault line. Harold's whole style of leadership, the way he was such a magician, was to bring the left and the right together, to give them nowhere else to go, to force them to collaborate. But the fault lines were pretty deep in those days in the Labour Party. So you use the Cabinet, I think he used the Cabinet, to force people together. You force people to a conclusion and then enforce that decision on them.

I suspect that Theresa May finds herself with a fault line that's even more polarised. She has to let everyone have their say as she navigates her way across the tightrope without falling off.

DT: Under Gordon Brown, the National Economic Council became important.

PM: The National Economic Council was a rally to arms. It was Britain facing one of its biggest post-war crises, the banking nightmare, their recapitalisation, all the ramifications of the global financial crisis. The National Economic Council was like the 'War Cabinet'. It actually met in COBRA [Cabinet Office Briefing Room A], in the Cabinet Office. I was brought back to be its main personality.

DT: So it had a symbolic importance, but was it where decisions were taken?

PM: Up to a point. It was essentially saying to all the relevant ministers, you're going to be called to the National Economic Council to provide answers and ideas, ways forward and new policies. And you're going to have to circulate a concise paper beforehand. The Prime Minister is going to be in the Chair, you're going to come under very close scrutiny, so you'd better perform. That was what the National Economic Council was all about.

DT: And it provided a bit of structure. Number 10 under Tony Blair, particularly by the end, was a reasonably well-structured operation. It was relatively clear who was doing what. Then under Gordon Brown, I think things were a bit more fluid...

PM: They were fluid because he came into Number 10 with a fairly set outlook, which was that anything Tony did, he would do differently. If Tony had one well-structured, well-staffed machine, then he would have something different.

He tried initially to get Ed Balls to run Number 10. And Ed quite rightly said: "No, I don't want to be your Minister without Portfolio, thank you very much. I want to have a department of my own." And Gordon said: "Well, you can both have a department and run Number 10." Ed said: "No, that isn't going to work." When Ed rejected that role, Gordon had nothing to put in his place. There was nobody running Number 10 for the first year. There was little structure, not enough staff. It had been disassembled and he was struggling to reassemble it.

CH: Is that a continuing flaw in the British system? The lack of continuity of roles in the centre.

PM: No, it's just that different Prime Ministers have different approaches and styles and Number 10, apart from the continuity of private secretaries, reflects that. I think David Cameron might have made a similar mistake of not putting his Number 10 machine in place, in full working order, firing on all cylinders, at the beginning. Then he learned what a Prime Minister needs in order to be effective.

There's no manual, no handbook. When you become Prime Minister, the civil service will say: "Look, this is how the basics are organised," and their priority is to make sure they are driving it.

But there's more to Number 10 than having a top-flight civil service machine. There's an enormous amount of politics that flows through Number 10 to state the obvious. There's a colossal amount of media handling that goes on. As we've seen over decades, increasingly international handling and foreign policy flows through Number 10. You need a much more elaborate and sophisticated machine. Government is more fast, furious and complex than in the past.

CH: Does it benefit from having that strengthened minister working closely with the Prime Minister? Either you in the Minister without Portfolio role or as First Secretary later. Theresa May brought in Damian Green after she lost some of the strength that she had elsewhere.

PM: What happened with me in the last period of government was that both the Prime Minister's senior civil servants and the Cabinet Secretary and his political staff, became frustrated about his [Gordon Brown's] working methods. They thought that it would help if they had somebody who was a wicket keeper, not somebody who would second guess what he was doing, but who would get there quicker. Somebody who could say to him: "This isn't working," or "Look, this minister is really very unhappy about what you're doing," or "The Cabinet are developing a view here which you need to address." It's political management. Somebody who is knowledgeable of the Prime Minister and loyal but also can formulate and channel a wider, more political view and do the handling, be in touch with important stakeholders, whether it be the Cabinet or the parliamentary party or the media or the civil service themselves, who feel they're not getting through. That's why I was made First Secretary of State.

Gordon wanted to name me as Deputy Prime Minister but First Secretary was inserted instead because I was in the Lords rather than the Commons. It didn't matter to me and I tried to do a job.

It wasn't always easy because Gordon used to work through so many different channels. It was not always as orderly as it could have been. Indeed the Cabinet Secretary, Jeremy Heywood, complained to me at the end that I hadn't been assertive enough. He said: "When you took on this role we thought you'd take control." I said: "Our system doesn't work like that." The Prime Minister is a lot more *primus* than *pares* in our system. Authority emanates from and runs back up to the Prime Minister. You can only do so much as a Deputy PM or First Secretary of State.

I was also very busy in my own department, which by that time had become big. I went back and forth most days between my department and my room in the Cabinet Office. I was working weekends, Saturday and sometimes Sunday, because the Prime Minister didn't stop working and always insisted that people should come in and work with him at weekends. He hardly ever went to Chequers or if he did, he'd come beetling back as fast as he could in order to get back into his open plan office in Number 10. There was never any rest. I did my best and said to Jeremy: "Well, I do think I've made a difference

but I'm not the Prime Minister so there are limits." At the end of the day, the Prime Minister calls the shots, he designs the layers of personal and political machinery he wants to work through – it's a reflection of his personality.

The thing I would say in conclusion about being a minister is that every day you are in a permanent struggle between dealing with your in-tray – what's happening and what has to be dealt with that day – and your strategic goals and agenda that needs constant pushing weekly. You mustn't let the first squeeze out the second. I made space for what I wanted to do and where I wanted to take the department, the policies and legislation and the implementation that I wanted as my legacy so that I really could feel that I was making a difference. And the risk was always that the endless, daily in-tray, whether it be policy or political or media, takes you away from the strategic and the longer term.

The second tension is between the policy and the political. Some ministers love policy. They're doers, they get into the minutiae. But they're not such good story tellers, using the media to explain what they're doing and why. I'm not saying that ministers need to be self-promoters, although of course many are and devote an enormous amount of time to self-advertisement rather than policy. But you need to be a bit of a both. You need to be a doer and a story teller.

Giving yourself time as a minister for reflection is really hard. To carve out that space and that time to sit down with people within your department, as I always enjoyed doing, plus two or three outsiders. Either outsiders who are brought in as political advisers and policy advisers, or people who are just your network. People who are intelligent, sensible people with some good ideas and always an original view to express. To get them to work with your officials, which is something I did at the beginning and the end, is something that you have to create space for.

I was very lucky in the end. I not only had my personal assistant, Maree Glass, back but I had two or three really superb special advisers. One of whom looked after politics and media and was first rate, Patrick Loughran. The other, Geoffrey Norris, came with 10 years of policy experience at Number 10 before he joined me. He had such good judgement and the officials knew that they could gauge him, use him as a sounding board: "What do you think the Secretary of State will feel about this? What would he want to do about that?" Then sometimes Geoffrey would come into me, just wander into my office, and say: "You've got to give a view to the department on this. I think we should do this. These are the arguments for and against. What's your call?" Done.

Now that's what makes the machinery of government within a department work. Somebody at the top with a clear view, decisive, knows how to allocate time, can reflect as well as push the papers and submissions through. Somebody who is strategic as well as able to deal with a big in-tray. Somebody who works very hard and does their homework and sends their boxes back fully done every morning. A clear view written on submissions, even if it's "need more information about X". That's what makes things

work. Personal relationships, getting grown-ups around you. Getting people in who the civil servants can bounce ideas off and react to and work with, through whom they can understand the Secretary of State and what they want to achieve.

The third person I had, Stephen Adams, who came with me from Brussels, was somebody who thought and wrote really well. Brilliant mind. You have almost no writing time as a minister. So speeches, green papers, departmental memorandums. Somebody who has a clear, consistent idea of what you want, the policies that you're pursuing, how you want to explain them in persuasive language. There's then a consistency and a continuity of communications that runs through the whole operation. It is like having an extra brain.

DT: I remember from the Treasury that Ed Balls and advisors did things, and then they'd liaise with Gordon Brown. That sort of worked, but lacking that arrangement in Number 10, I imagine it was pretty tricky.

PM: Yes, that was the system in the Treasury with Gordon. Ed Balls essentially ran it, although there were other individuals who has responsibility for certain tasks and policy areas. They were quite an integrated operation but it did not transfer to Number 10.

CH: That point about First Secretary roles was interesting. Over time, there have been different people playing that role. Willy Whitelaw's role during Thatcher's time, other times it's been Cabinet Secretaries, as with Jeremy Heywood.

PM: Yes, Jeremy has a good, strong intellect and he has very good political judgement as well as complete integrity.

The reason I was partially able to do it was because I had a relationship with Gordon going back to the 1980s. There was the breach with Tony after 1994, which everyone knows about, but when that tension was out of the way after 2007 it ended up resuming what we'd had in the 1980s, not quite the same but very close to it. I could say things to him in a way that I knew that he wouldn't just ignore or brush aside.

CH: I can see why he [Gordon Brown] wanted Ed Balls to potentially do that role, but I can also see why Ed didn't want to.

PM: Ed wanted to go off and do his own thing in government, which he did successfully.

DT: What was your experience of civil servants generally?

PM: I was only in one department where we had a fairly senior civil servant who wrote submissions which I found difficult to read and follow. He must just have had a way of constructing submissions I just couldn't get into. But apart from that...

DT: What was the subject?

PM: I am not going to say. He was a very nice and thoughtful individual, but how you write submissions is very important. A secretary of state has so much to read and so many submissions and the substantive points they are making have to be well and clearly argued and set out. You have to hit the ground running every time you start reading a fresh submission. If you've been brought in to the subject at a tangent or brought in over there whereas the central point is over here, you're going uphill and down dale and possibly round the garden before you get a handle on what you are being told.

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