

Ministers Reflect

Andrea Leadsom



29 October 2020

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2010 – present: Conservative MP for South Northamptonshire

Government career

2019–20: Secretary of state for business, energy and industrial strategy

2017–19: Leader of the House of Commons

2016–17: Secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs

2015–16: Minister of state for energy

2014–15: Economic secretary to the Treasury

Andrea Leadsom was interviewed by Dr Catherine Haddon and Maddy Thimont-Jack on 29th October 2020 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project. The interview took place remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Andrea Leadsom reflects on working to deliver Brexit in different departments, reforms to the House of Commons and learning about energy on the job. She also talks about the decision not to bail out Thomas Cook after its collapse.

Catherine Haddon (CH): If we could start just by going back to when you first entered government as economic secretary to the Treasury, how did you find out that you were being offered the job and what was the first day like? Just take us back to then.

Andrea Leadsom (AL): I got a phone call from David Cameron as a result of Maria Miller [secretary of state for culture, media and sport, 2012-14] resigning and Saj [Sajid Javid, Economic Secretary to the Treasury] getting Maria’s job. I had observed the unfolding story about Maria – as a fellow MP I felt very sorry for her under the circumstances of her resignation – and the last thing I was thinking about was whether there would be anything in it for me. So it was a bit of an extraordinary surprise. Also, because the press line had always been that [George] Osborne [chancellor of the exchequer, 2010–16] will ‘never’ have Leadsom in the Treasury, in spite of her 25 years in banking, because she annoyed him so much over a couple of things that remain nameless.... But George was always a great person to work for and I really enjoyed it – he was a real ideas person and keen to allow me to share ideas too. So we worked together very well on things like the pensions freedoms.

The first thing I did as City minister was to go into this huge and rather gloomy office in the Treasury – very high ceilings, very echoey, very bare – to be greeted by my private office. I didn’t really know what a private office was – but soon found out it was eight young people who sat outside my office, all keen to offer cups of tea and briefings on every subject in my portfolio!

And the first thing I was told by my private secretary was “you have one very big piece of work, which is immediately urgent and on your desk. And that is to decide the height of the ring fence”. If you remember, we were splitting up wholesale and investment banking, and the idea was to decide how much wholesale banking you could offer before you fell into the investment banking bit. It was a complicated briefing and set of decisions. And I just remember observing – it was 14 April 2014 and it was a boiling hot weekend – and I was sitting in my garden, with a sheaf of papers about two inches thick, going through it all and thinking I’m very glad I am City minister because I would wager that there are not too many people in parliament who would have a clue what this was all about. Because I had been on the Treasury Select Committee and worked in finance for so long, it did immediately feel like ‘I am a square peg in a square hole’. It was fantastic, it was like coming home....

CH: What struck you then, coming from a finance background, working in the City, about how the civil service works and how it supports ministers? Were there things that surprised you or that you felt could be improved, in terms of supporting new ministers?

AL: My finance career had been unusual, because I had gone from managing a big team to being part time in a senior role, with no management duties. I think one of the big observations I've made, in my government jobs, is the dislocation between the 'people management' of your private office versus the responsibility to set the agenda for your portfolio as a minister, or for your department as a secretary of state. And I've always felt that ought to be something that could be improved on. I don't know whether historically that's come about because members of parliament don't necessarily have management experience, but, for me, one of the things I always was determined to do – and believe always did achieve – was to create a good team spirit within the private office, which I think for some private secretaries came as a surprise to them. I think most in the private office are very determined to help their minister, and support them, yet not so many private secretaries feel that their boss is interested in them, their development, promotion prospects and so on.

So in the early days of the private office, it felt to me a bit standoffish on their part really, which I don't think was intended at all. I think they were just being very courteous and trying to be very supportive. But it did mean that that first time, me not really realising what a private office's function was, it did feel as if they were holding me at arm's length and I was kind of like their go-to for this huge amount of work. They would support the work, but not have a relationship. So that changed over quite a short period of time. But the kind of 'breaking in' of me was realising that the team spirit isn't naturally there, you have to create it.

CH: How did it compare when you got the job as energy minister at DECC [Department for Energy and Climate Change] after the 2015 election? Was the experience of getting the job very different? Was the induction very different?

AL: I would say not. The difference was in me. First, as I say, I felt like a square peg in a square hole as City minister. I was there for a year and a month and then we had the election and then suddenly, David Cameron wanted to give me this promotion, which I really didn't want. Because number one, I didn't know much about energy policy and number two, I loved being City minister. It was one of those kinds of situations where he's like "I've got fantastic news for you" and I am like "no, no, no, no". So it was kind of like "oh, okay then". The upside was I would be working with Amber Rudd, who was a very good personal friend. You know, we campaigned together from 2005, where we both fought safe Labour seats in Merseyside. So that was the upside, because it was just going to be the 'Andrea and Amber team', which was going to be good fun because we knew each other well and that was exciting. But I was devastated to leave the Treasury.

So I was probably a bit down in the dumps for the first little while. But at the same time, I'd learned from the experience in the Treasury of the really key importance of hitting the ground running with your private office and getting to know them as individuals, knowing what they do. So I would say, with the private office, we very quickly formed a good bond and that was a really great experience, working with them. I mean, it was a great experience working with the private office in Treasury, but it was a bit of a surprise to me, so it took longer to really develop the relationship.

CH: And how did Amber Rudd and George Osborne compare as heads of department? Were there differences in their style and the way they dealt with junior ministers?

AL: The functions were very different. When you are chancellor, you have, what were we?... Five junior ministers. Six even, including the lords minister... or two lords ministers, it's slightly hazy now. So we didn't see much of the chancellor. We would have a periodic, I think possibly a monthly meeting and then I would have one-to-one meetings with him, where it related to, for example, UK financial services, the organisation that owned all of the shares in the UK banks – I was very closely working with George on that. And I was also working with him on pensions freedoms and on issues around bank regulation. And then, of course, when it came to things like fiscal events, we worked very closely on ideas for the budget. But again, it was sort of one-way traffic. As a junior minister, you would put your ideas in, up the chain, and they would go into the melting pot and if you were lucky, you would hear back! Because it was of necessity, the job was so huge, that the chancellor's position couldn't give a huge amount of time to each individual junior minister. So I would say, there wasn't much management of the team going on.

One example I would give is that was I was deeply unhappy with the quality of Treasury correspondence and it fell to me, as the junior minister with responsibility for Treasury correspondence, to ensure quality and turnaround times and reporting to parliament and so on. I was very unhappy with it. My view was, having again had a lot of experience of customer service in banking, this is the world's window on the Treasury, this is what taxpayers are paying for. When somebody writes to you saying "my mother's just died and it's appalling, because the inheritance tax is blah blah blah", you don't write back saying, "well, that's not me, it's HMRC". You write back saying "I am so sorry to hear that your mother's died and hope you're okay and let me be helpful, may I suggest you call blah blah blah". So it was things like that, and I had a big review... in fact, I remember going 'on strike', which I think was unheard of....

I remember calling Nick Macpherson, who was then perm sec [permanent secretary], and saying this is just totally unacceptable, this week I have sent back something like 85% of all of the correspondence that's been sent to me to sign off. And he was like "oh dear, have you, that's awful. I'll tell you what, it can all come to me for the next week and we'll see what I think of it". And at the end of the following week he rang me up and said "well, you are right, it's extraordinary". It was things like, 'Mr Bloggs' at the top

of the letter and then ‘Dear, Miss Smith’ in the salutation. I felt it was clearly overworked/overwhelmed staff who weren’t really seeing how important this is to you as the person at the end of this letter. It wasn’t only empathy, it was basic errors. And I think that I did have quite a tough time over that, because I think a lot of people were like ‘how dare you, we are doing our best’. So I was on the one hand trying to be very sympathetic to their workload, which was huge, but at the same time determined.... What you have to do is put yourself in the shoes of the person who’s actually taken the time to write to you about their situation and therefore deserves a thought through reply.

In terms of energy, it was very different because essentially DECC was the smallest department. Amber was secretary of state and I was the only junior minister in the Commons. As well as promoting me, David Cameron took away the other junior minister, who had been Amber herself. So I was now doing her old job, plus the job of the minister of state, while she was SoS [secretary of state]. So we had a huge portfolio to cover and were faced with the real challenge of one particular policy area, that of subsidies for renewables. We knew for a fact, from the research, that the financial viability of solar panels and onshore wind farms was now so strong that those subsidies were now barely needed to make them viable. But, of course, we ended up in this huge row over whether we were anti-decarbonisation because we were taking these subsidies away. And we were arguing “no, we are for the energy bill payer” – there are many people who can’t heat themselves and because of the way the subsidies worked, they went directly on your energy bill, not onto the taxpayer at large. Therefore, elderly people and people in very cold homes were having to pay in the region of £120 a year each on their energy bill, which was just going to pay renewables subsidies. So we were reviewing it to make sure it was enough to keep the industry going, but not so good as to mean that people couldn’t heat themselves. It was a huge political row over that, plus the fact that onshore wind farms were very much anathema in many local communities, who felt they were unacceptable.

So we were doing that, and we also had the Paris Climate Change conference, which was a fantastic thing – completely the opposite of what people accused us of with the subsidies! We were working on all of these excellent policies – smart meters, getting Hinckley Point [C, the new nuclear power station] off the ground. My great regret was that the carbon capture and storage budget item got scrapped... a billion quid for proving carbon capture and storage, that was scrapped in Osborne’s first budget after the 2015 election. I was gutted about that. But then we proudly announced we would be taking coal off the system altogether by 2025. It was very complicated – that winter we had the tightest margins ever in terms of our capacity for keeping the lights on versus our energy demand. We had our work cut out....

Having been a square peg in a square hole, I was now just like “right, there is all this different stuff happening... we have got to get on with it”. So I just did almost my own PhD in energy policy – I literally would go home and start studying, again and again and

again. That summer, I remember going through page after page of energy papers, energy questions and to my huge satisfaction, when I came back that September – when the House sat again – we had this group of big energy producers at a roundtable, all firing questions at me. When I left at the end there was this one guy who just came up to me and he said “wow. How do you know all that? You’ve only been doing the job for a couple of months” and I was so chuffed at having managed to impress this cynical energy bloke. So yes, that is always the way – other than the Treasury job, which was just fabulous – the big issue, always, with a new ministerial job is getting up to speed. To do your job properly, you have to take the first couple of months spending a lot of time on briefings.

Maddy Thimont Jack (MTJ): I just wanted to ask a question about the EU referendum campaign. Obviously, you were a prominent supporter of Leave, you participated in the Wembley Arena debate, while still a minister, opposite your secretary of state Amber Rudd. I am interested in what the experience of working as a minister during that period, when the principle of collective responsibility had been suspended for the campaign, how did you find doing both?

AL: Number one, I was amazed that collective responsibility was lifted. It had never happened before, and I was really impressed with David Cameron. I was a junior minister, not sat around the cabinet table, so I still didn’t really know him at all. I mean, I had met him a couple of times when he’d offered me jobs. So I didn’t really feel I knew him, but he called all of the junior ministers in, round the cabinet table and he said to all of us “we’re going to do this referendum and you will have to do what you believe is right for your country and your constituency and I am tasking all of you to do what your conscience tells you”. And now, for me, as a backbencher, I’d had my three Bs: babies, banks and Brussels. The Brussels bit was the Fresh Start Project (FSP), which was a project I had led, with support from lots of Conservative MPs and quite a few Labour MPs, because I’d set up an all-party group on EU reform as well.

So when David Cameron told us in, I think it must have been January 2016 or maybe even late the previous year, that we were going to be given the permission to do this, I felt this huge burden of responsibility, because I had genuinely wanted EU reform. And FSP produced several major papers on ‘*Options for Change*’, the ‘*Manifesto for Change*’ and so on. All very explicit – about immigration policy, EU spending, energy policy etc, really detailed papers on what excellent reform would look like. So I was really keen on this. David Cameron had said he was going to go and negotiate a reformed deal with the EU. We’d just completed the *Manifesto for Change* and taken it to him as FSP members, before he decided to hold the referendum. So by now I’d had a couple of really good meetings with him about EU reform and I’d kind of assumed “great, he’s probably going to use our manifesto for change and he’s going to negotiate those”. The manifesto contained about 12 demands that were essential and sensible reform ideas.... What I did, between then and 20 February 2016, was to work up a letter to my constituents arguing for Remain, and another arguing for Leave. To me, my vote was going to be

dependent on how close the reform programme got to what we'd set out in the *Manifesto for Change*, where we'd tried to distil down to the absolute bare minimum of what staying in the EU could support in terms of the UK's interests.

But, of course, when David Cameron came back on 20 February with his reform, it achieved less than half a percent of the proposals in the manifesto for change. So, for me, it was a total no brainer – that's it then, we've got to leave. I sent out the letter to my constituents, quite a lengthy letter, explaining precisely why we should leave and why we would be so much better off out. In that run up, I was very much focused on the job as energy minister, but my weekends were spent in careful consideration of where I was going to be on the Leave debate. So when it got to the date of the reform coming back, that was it, I was now committed to the Leave side.

But it was only then that I really started to take an active role. Until then, I was flat out on my energy job and after that, I was still very much focused on the energy, because there was so much we were doing, and there was still only two of us! Because I was the only junior Commons minister, that meant every Westminster Hall debate, every adjournment debate, every oral questions, there was a huge burden on me, as the junior minister, to do it all, as well as correspondence and written questions. So I had a hugely, hugely busy time and we were still trying to do the Energy Bill as well, which was going through committee. I was doing that, plus all of the delegated committees for all energy policies – there are so many energy SIs [statutory instruments] to approve different regulations and so on. So I didn't actually have that much spare time for the Leave campaign. I had to choose quite carefully what I was going to do. I had one of my parliamentary staff, who was a really good scribe, and another person who was a very good friend of mine (in fact my association chairman) working on messaging and drafting articles etc. We would sit around and discuss what are we going to talk about today? Should it be the strengths of the UK out of the EU or shall it be how immigration policy can be so much better if it's up to the UK government? Or shall it be how we'll save so much money for our own priorities? We would discuss the topic and then they would go away and do drafting and then I would, sort of, top and tail it, whether it was an op-ed or for a paper. The Fresh Start Project continued meeting, but by now it was a meeting of Brexiteers who were meeting to discuss why we should leave – on energy policy, why leaving would be better. On manufacturing, why leaving would be better, farming, why leaving would be better, fisheries, why leaving would be better. That was the kind of papers we were doing, and we were presenting those using the different members of parliament who had been part of the Fresh Start Project. I was kind of trying to manage rather than do a lot of that workload, because the day job was incredibly busy.

MTJ: After the UK voted to leave the EU, you were appointed environment secretary by Theresa May. Defra [the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] is one of the departments that really was massively impacted by leaving the EU – so much of its work up until that point had been related to what was going on in the EU. So how did you find joining a department at the beginning of that process and how did you go about preparing the department for such a huge change in its role going forward?

AL: It was fantastic to have that job. Obviously, the period immediately preceding had been somewhat traumatic. I withdrew from the leadership campaign because I was so concerned that we would be in recession after such a lengthy proposed nine-week leadership campaign. You know, we were just getting back onto an even keel after the financial crisis. But nevertheless, because I'd withdrawn, I recognised that I'd in effect handed the job of PM over to Theresa, and the responsibility for delivering Brexit. When I rang her to tell her I was about to withdraw, I asked her outright "will you undertake to deliver on the referendum?". "Absolutely", she said. And so my personal commitment in going into Defra was to go to any length to help her deliver Brexit. I had this very profound, personal commitment to helping her to deliver Brexit. On the one hand, I was totally motivated and delighted to be in that department because, as you say, Maddy, about 80% of everything Defra did in the old days was directed by the EU. The chance to change that was the positive side. The other side of the equation was that department was full – full to bursting – of people who thought we should still be in the EU. When I first got there, I was hearing tales of civil servants who had sobbed at their desk when the result came through. So I was very, very careful, bearing in mind what I've said about the importance of taking the team with you, of proper management, of having good relationships with key people.

My first couple of days there, I did what's called a 'town hall' meeting, in the beautiful atrium of our beautiful old office (which Defra is no longer in.) It had this fantastic huge atrium, with sort of internal balconies, so people could be out on those internal balconies, as well as in the atrium. So we had a big town hall – it was videoed – and I and the ministerial team were very much focused on telling people "this is going to be great and we appreciate that many of you have differing views to us, but nevertheless there is a way through this and we are going to be really working to make a success of it". That was important with the broader Defra team. Then with the private office, again understanding their views and building a good relationship with them from day one. But also, now, for the first time, I was a cabinet minister and I also had a team of ministers. I was also determined that we would be joined at the hip, you know, singing from the same hymn sheet and all those other clichés. So I organised, every Thursday morning, breakfast together, in my office, just us four ministers. It was a lovely group and we would discuss each other's policy priorities, and then we would discuss Brexit. Also issues like staff morale and things like that. We did that each week – I think – I'm told that's quite unusual for a secretary of state. With Amber and I, we'd met very

frequently, but there were only two of us and with the chancellor, we rarely met, because he was embroiled in other things.

So anyway, I would advocate that as a secretary of state, having your ministerial team feeling motivated and knowing what you're doing and what your priorities are and how that fits into their priorities is really key. The other thing I did in that first week was to have an 'away day' of all of the directors general to discuss how are we going to make Brexit happen, what are we going to do to take the staff with us, what are the segments, what are the areas of policy – fisheries policy, farm subsidies policy, environment policy and so on. And at the same time, what was immediately on my plate, extraordinarily, was the badger cull. Because we had to take a decision within a few days of whether to extend the pilot scheme on badger culling. So we were having what they call in Defra 'bird tables', which is very sweet, but what it means is all of the key people stand around a table, which is the bird table, with maps and plots and plans and so on, and have a standing up meeting, to just discuss the key highlights of what we're doing. And we also had things like the arrival of Asian hornets, and we had concerns over, you name it, particular moths and oh, disease to oak trees, yes – I forget, but you know all of these things that are just the day job, that are suddenly tearingly urgent, but at the same time the desire to get off on the right footing. So yes, I had this huge commitment and this big target to get through, but actually what was brilliant about Defra was they were so professional. Nobody once ever said to me "how dare you – a Brexiter – come in here", which wouldn't have surprised me. I think tensions were running very high. But they really did immediately seek to change their own approach, on a sixpence, and do exactly what we needed to do Brexit.

CH: If we can move on to when you were leader of the House of Commons after the 2017 election. Could you tell us a little bit about being appointed to that role? Was there a strategy for how to deal with minority government in parliament, what conversations did you have with the prime minister and the chief whip and so forth about how you would go about handling it?

AL: Again, I was very disappointed to be moved on, on that occasion, because we were just getting somewhere and there was an awful lot that was unfinished, that I was really keen to get done. I think that's one of the frustrations, when you get moved once again after only a year. I had planned the launch of the 25-year Environment Plan and also the banning of ivory sales – some really momentous things that people were really longing to see. All of the announcements about farm subsidies. Yes, that was frustrating personally. Moving on, again I was just like "what is this new job, why am I doing this, why me?", you know. But it became, I would say, probably the job I enjoyed the most and certainly it was the job I stayed in the longest. I was there for two and a bit years. It was a superb job and actually fascinating for being in a hung parliament. The point of it is that you are government's spokesman in parliament, and you are parliament's spokesman in government, and both of those jobs are equally as important. In other words, what you have to do is to keep the peace in the chamber. In that sense, you

should be working hand in glove with the Speaker [of the House of Commons]. Discuss.... And on the other hand, you are also there to kind of ‘sell’ government policy into parliament and to help parliamentarians to understand why you are doing what you’re doing.

And then, of course, you have this fabulous, unique Thursday event which is like PMQs [prime minister’s questions], but a nice one, where people can ask you literally anything from, you know, “Mrs Smith has been finger knitting to help the local Scouts for the last 12 years. Will you thank her for me?”. And then you can go into a lovely, profuse thank you, which is then turned into a delightful press release for that colleague’s constituent. And that can be from all sides of the House, without any favourites. All the way through to “you idiot, you made people vote for Brexit and we Scot Nats [the Scottish National Party] didn’t want to” and “what the hell are you doing and you now need to blah blah blah”. It went from the sublime to the ridiculous really.

And many questions needed a real focus on procedure, so again this was a new job where I had to become quite expert in procedure. Reading *Erskine May* [the rulebook on parliamentary procedure], having endless briefings about the rules about such as ‘made affirmative’ SI versus a ‘negative’ SI. Actually, one of the key discussions I had I remember to this day. We had muddled on to recess, with no majority so very little business able to be done. My family and I were on a narrow boat trip along the Thames, when I had a phone call from Roy Stone [then principal private secretary to the government chief whip], now Sir Roy Stone, who was the power behind the throne in the Whips’ Office and still is to this day – a fantastic guy, who has been in the job for... I think it’s probably now about 25 years. There is nothing he doesn’t know about procedure. He is certainly on a par with the parliamentary clerks in terms of his knowledge of how things work. He rang me up to say that we were going to have to pass something akin to the Harrison motion in order to be able to get our business through after recess. And I was like “okay, explain, from first principles, what does that mean”. And what that meant, of course, is that because once we’d achieved the confidence and supply agreement with the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party] on Brexit, finance and stronger UK votes, what that then meant is we didn’t necessarily have any other majority anywhere else. In order for government to work efficiently, you have to be able to have delegated legislative committees that handle legislation away from the floor of the House. So although recognising that because of the hung parliament, we would have to have a lot of important committees in the chamber, on the floor of the House, we couldn’t do everything there, because we would just never get through the vast amount that had to be done to deliver Brexit. So what we had to do was to be able to get our business through DL [delegated legislation] committees – if you simply looked at the hung parliament numbers, you would always have a tied vote in committee, or actually worse still an automatic loss. Potentially the committee chair could cast a vote in favour of the government, but you couldn’t count on it. And because with Brexit, where party boundaries were already being blurred, the reality was that we had to be

able to get the legislation through. That was similar to what had happened under the Harrison motion back in 1974 so we determined we had to pass a new motion that would enable the government to have a majority in DL committees, otherwise parliament would just literally grind to a halt. Getting that through the House was a major event.

But so, too, was creating the European Statutory Instruments Review Committee, getting that approved and setting that up and then getting the processes through, so that it could scrutinise all Brexit SIs in advance. What we had to have – because of the sensitivity of so many of them, and because some were for no deal, some were for a deal, some were for an extension, so we were trying to cover all the bases. And this ran to thousands of SIs. So we created a triage system that Nat Evans, the leader of the [House of] Lords, and I, and the whips of both Houses would review in advance all SIs. Our homework, every weekend, was to go through these green, amber, red SIs, looking at yes, this one's fine, you can get that one through straight away. This one is going to need some serious parliamentary handling, and this one is going to have to go through the parliamentary committee that I chaired, as the leader of the Commons, with a proper handling strategy.

Which basically meant for any bill, or for any sort of red traffic light SI, it was going to have to go to the parliamentary committee that met once a week or more, which would have each of the key departmental leads, all of the business managers, the attorney general's office and the advocate general. Plus the devolved ministers speaking for the devolved nations. And so there you'd have to have a handling strategy. So we were putting SIs through this, as well as every scrap of legislation. And that soon became the committee that ministers dreaded going to, because I had to be absolutely brutal. So very often, I would have to tell a minister that we could not approve their 'Christmas tree bill', i.e. a bill to which 'baubles' (hostile amendments) could be attached! Very often the core of the bill was attractive, but bearing in mind we had an anti-Brexit Speaker, there was a high risk that all sorts of amendments that might normally not be considered in order, could be allowed. We had to imagine what somebody might want to add – if we were passing Northern Ireland's budget, (because they had no Northern Ireland assembly), for example. Amendments could have very serious consequences for the people of Northern Ireland. So we would have to consider what people might hang on a piece of legislation that would have nothing to do with the core purpose of an essential piece of legislation. It was extraordinary, the work behind the scenes, to try and ensure that we could actually make progress in parliament.

CH: I know it was a hugely busy time, but is the leader's office supported well enough, and do you think that the civil service and government understand parliament enough to cope with those sorts of situations?

AL: I would say that the best private office team ever was the leader's office team. And one of the reasons for that is possibly because it's so small. Certainly, when I was BEIS

[the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy] secretary of state with 3,000 civil servants, I sometimes found it harder to get a swift response than being leader, with a team of about 20 civil servants. Because I knew them all individually, we divvied up the categories of work. So, as well as all of the legislative work, which was vast, we also had the ‘Pestminster’ scandal [on bullying and harassment in parliament]. I worked until midnight every night, cross party, to get the complaints procedure up and running and there was no precedent for that, and that was seven different political parties just trying to get it done. But, essentially, I had to do much of the legwork, because you couldn’t do that by committee. So I was presenting to the cross-party working group all the time, and then taking away their thoughts and trying to make progress on that.

And, of course, trying to get through the R&R [Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal)] Bill, which for 40 years had needed tackling! It seemed, in a hung parliament – ironically – there was more of a chance of getting it through, because the governing party would generally be reluctant to spend the money, whereas the opposition might be willing to. So we had these three vast projects. The legislative one – the business as usual one – was the huge one, and then these other two. In answer to your question, with a bigger workload than most leader’s offices – since 1974 perhaps, since the last hung parliament – I would say that those motivated and really hard-working team members – the hours we worked were unbelievable – did an absolutely brilliant job. They definitely could have been better supported, certainly there were some areas where we struggled to get time with the prime minister, for example. And certainly, we had to build our own relationships with Number 10’s spads [special advisers]. One of the positives was that the PM recruited a couple of people into parliamentary legislation spad roles. We had two excellent colleagues, Nikki and Joe, whose job was to help us prioritise business, but also to feedback to Number 10 when there was a hostile amendment put forward or an attempt to make us lose a vote. They would prioritise getting the attention of the prime minister on questions like “what are we going to do now? Are we going to pull this bill or are we going to carry on regardless, bearing in mind if we do, the consequence will be blah, blah or blah”.

CH: You mentioned John Bercow earlier on, in terms of the importance of working with the Speaker [of the House of Commons]. Everyone saw some of the public battles that the government had with Bercow. What are the difficulties behind the scenes? What is the relationship between the leader of the House and the Speaker, if you just briefly give people an insight into that?

AL: Yes. It’s a really key relationship. The general convention is that the Speaker and the leader meet privately every other week and it reached a point where I had to take someone with me, because of the level of vitriol in those meetings! And he, likewise, said he needed to have someone there, because apparently I was extraordinarily difficult. So that was a problem. We shared some genuine desires to get things done in terms of diversity of parliament and tackling some of the key issues. We’d also, when I

first started out, had a perfectly good relationship over things like HS2 [High Speed 2, the railway project], because we were both against the project, so I used to occasionally speak for him in the chamber. But I don't want to really talk about his and my relationship, because he's not here to answer for himself.

But it is a vital relationship and even more important is the functioning, the proper functioning, of the House of Commons Commission. And when I was leader of the Commons, it did not function properly. Meetings were cancelled or delayed at short notice, which when you're the leader and you are expected in the chamber, would mean you then couldn't go, because the chamber was the priority. The meetings of the House of Commons Commission had a huge agenda to get through, and we often failed to get to some very salient points in the agenda because of the way it had been chaired. The voting system in the House of Commons Commission, I think, is very deeply flawed. You have the clerk and the director general both there, but they are not voting members. You've got huge experience amongst the non-exec members, but they can't vote. And, of course, the members who can vote will tend to vote on party political lines. And so, if you are the governing party, you are always in a minority. And so, again, I won't give examples, because nobody is here to give their side of the story – but there were a number of examples of where I felt the right thing was X and was just voted down on party lines. And, of course, once you are voted down, the press release shows only the decision, not the debate or the votes. So I do believe that there is a huge piece of work required to reform the House of Commons Commission, the way it works. In particular, I believe that the members of it, apart from the leader, the shadow leader and the Speaker, should be elected, not appointed.

MTJ: Picking up on that, you mentioned the 'Pestminster' scandal and that one of your biggest priorities as leader was tackling the bullying and harassment. Could you reflect on what you learned about trying to achieve change in parliament – what were the challenges and how did you try and approach that?

AL: There's a number of things I'm really proud of from my time there, one is the ICGS [Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme], the complaints scheme, and another one is baby leave. I am really proud of those. I am also proud of getting the R&R Bill through. Those would be the three things that I think are worth mentioning. With the complaints scheme, the cross-party working group, with seven political parties represented on it – a very diverse group of people from very different political backgrounds, but all sharing a determination to make a success of it. That was sheer hard work and it was very much 'hand-to-hand', because we also had to carry our backbenches with us. I had to make many adjustments to make sure that backbenchers would be happy with it and lots of consultations with different groups of people, like the 1922 Committee [Conservative backbenchers committee], with different groups of MPs of different opinions. So that was sheer hard work and determination and hours and hours of persuasion. But, ultimately, the reason we succeeded was because we kept together the seven of us cross-party, so, in the end, every party supported it. The few

MPs who were tempted to not support it were isolated because their party policy was to support. So that was how that went through.

On baby leave, it should never have come to that. That was kind of “we’ve got to carry on doing it this way because that’s the way we’ve always done it and just because you’ve had a baby, you’re an office holder, you should not be allowed any special privileges, blah blah blah”. And my view was and still is that if you’re ill or dying or if a close member of your family has a massive tragedy or if you have a baby, those things, in any walk of life, your employer should and would, under the law, give you some time off to deal with that emergency. Parliament should be no different, that is my view. And actually, it was a case of winning the argument. Again, that ended up being a cross-party coalition that got that through. But that was an extraordinary amount of process, because in a hung parliament, there were those who wanted to be very tribal about it, and there were those who just wanted to say well, let’s just do it. In the end, baby leave was ‘only’ baby leave (rather than broader) because that was the subject where we’d had several backbench debates, where the Procedure Committee had done a review of it etc. So that was a case of building the legitimacy of it, from the ground up. My disappointment there is that the review of it that’s just taken place didn’t, as I’d hoped, deal with the issue of if you’ve been off for a long time with a terrible illness and/or bereavements and so on. The tradition of pairing and slipping is just not, in my view, good enough because why should your constituents not have you vote on their behalf because of your personal, very serious and very important issue?

The third one, R&R, was really interesting – we treated it as a major project. We had Commons and Lords briefings for colleagues, arranged tours of the basement, an exhibition and various pieces in *The House* magazine and library briefings about the problems of the palace. We tried to make sure people understood that this wasn’t about new wallpaper, this was about asbestos and wiring and the potential for a sewage collapse. I think we literally just won the argument on the day. Again, persuading Number 10 to let me take it forward, to let parliament have its decision, was tricky. The problem is that the opposition might vote for it, and then on day two, turn around and say you are wasting taxpayers’ money on new wallpaper. That’s always the downside with this. The key point is that it’s a World UNESCO Heritage Site, we have to fix it, otherwise the day will come where we have to leave because there’s an asbestos leak or the sewage collapses and it’s no longer available to us, so we have to manage this issue. So, on the day, the argument was won, with Number 10 and with colleagues on all sides of the House. Each of these things was quite different, but actually I think highlights that change in parliament is so difficult, because individuals, on issues like that, will understandably go with what they believe is right – people have differing views!

MTJ: You were then appointed business secretary by Boris Johnson. BEIS is another department massively impacted by Brexit and you came in at the end of the Article 50 process, rather than the beginning like at Defra. I wondered whether you could draw any comparisons between those two periods of time in government, in such big departments?

AL: Yes. I went into BEIS following in Greg Clark's footsteps and we had been on opposite sides of the EU referendum – I have a huge regard for him, but there's no doubt I went into the department saying we are going to be independent, we are not going to closely mirror the EU, having left the EU. On issues like state aid, on issues like manufacturing, where we didn't want to simply say "yes, we will just follow exactly your rules in order to effectively stay in even though we've left". So there were some changes that I wanted to see done. In a way, you are right that with some very noticeable big deal exceptions on the Brexit discussion, what I was turning my attention to is how do we make our way in the world post-Brexit. That was where I completely loved the job.

What I did when I went in was to review the strategy, which had been very much about an industrial strategy and science and technology and so on, and what I wanted to do was to create a 'call to action'. So I rewrote the priorities for the department to say clearly that our number one priority, first and foremost is net zero. Everything we do is going to be geared towards building growth and jobs through decarbonising the UK and leading the world in the direction of net zero. Second to that would be solving the 'Grand Challenges'. Whether that's nuclear fusion, a vaccine for coronavirus, advancing life sciences, making driverless cars, space tech, those sort of grand challenges, that is the second priority, and the third is quite simply to make the UK the best place in the world to work and to grow a business. That was about reform of corporate governance, making flexible work standard. So I kind of refocused the department, these are the three things and everything, above all else, is to lead the world towards net zero. That was my real focus, the post-Brexit recovery and how are we going to make our way in the world.

My ambition, as an ex-banker, was to see the green economy bigger than UK financial services by 2030. That was my huge ambition and we had a whole strategy around that so again the frustration that I was only there for seven months – not knowing what came of any of that. And also, a frustration at not knowing why coronavirus wasn't anywhere on my radar! Really importantly, why was preparing for a pandemic never discussed with cabinet. That literally came out of nowhere, as far as I am concerned. I think there's lessons to be learned there – the whole Covid thing was after my time in cabinet, but I don't think anyone in BEIS really knew or was focusing on that while I was SoS.

MJ: Another big crisis that you dealt with was the collapse of Thomas Cook. Could you talk through the decision not to bail out the company at that point?

AL: That was an interesting one. I came under a lot of flak for not speaking to the chief executive the weekend they went bust. That's an interesting point for the IfG, because the reason for that is because it's a DfT [Department for Transport] lead, so Grant Shapps [secretary of state for transport] was speaking to the chief executive every 10 minutes, and I was speaking to Grant Shapps every 10 minutes. I can quite see why people would criticise that, because I was secretary of state for business, the clue is in the title.... But, of course, Thomas Cook was a travel company and because Grant was tasked with, squarely in his department, creating an airline overnight, to try and bring everyone home. It was a DfT lead and the convention is that whichever department leads manages the contact... had it been, I don't know, Sky News, that would have been DCMS [Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport] not me. I think that is an interesting question for government and for good governance – is what matters being seen to be contacting, or is it what you are actually doing behind the scenes? So for me, I was talking to Grant Shapps every 10 minutes. I spent the entire weekend on the phone, putting in place the emergency taskforce for the staff, the support, with DWP [Department for Work and Pensions], on helping to look at the implications for high streets, for shops, for workers etc.

But also talking to the Treasury about if we should bail them out. And the answer came back – again, and that was Treasury's shout, not BEIS' shout – is it a good idea to bail them out or are we throwing good money after bad? I challenged Treasury officials very strongly over that, and the answer came back no, because this is a drop in the ocean. The £200 million they are after today will just keep them going for a week, and the £1.7 billion or whatever it was of debt is not going away. There is no way they can be protected. So I was in that group, and in the COBR [the Civil Contingencies Committee, convened to handle major disruptions or national emergencies which meets in the Cabinet Office Briefing Room] meetings and so on, but it wasn't my lead. That, I think, was very important. Secondly, under BEIS is the insolvency service. I was involved with the appointment of the administrator and the insolvency practitioner. In particular, what I was very interested in – again, from my business background – was the corporate governance. The fact that it seemed pretty clear to me, that directors could be guilty of gross negligence, because they'd taken on this massive amount of debt, they'd taken on all of these shops at a time when most people were buying online, and it just made no sense. Yet they paid themselves large bonuses. It seemed to me that there were real questions to be asked from a corporate governance point of view, which was squarely in my bailiwick.

And I was already committed, under my third objective of making the UK the best place to work and grow a business, to looking at corporate governance. It was something I knew a lot about over many years in business. So my view was that the big weakness was that the insolvency service needed to be able to turn around its report on directors

and potential maladministration much faster than the average two-year turnaround time. That was one issue that I was focused on. The other one was the insurance for Thomas Cook, because they had some significant liabilities, another potential maladministration issue, whereby they had decided to self-insure for things like accidents that happen on holiday, where Thomas Cook were liable as the travel operator, for some dreadful, potentially life-changing, accidents that people had. And because they'd self-insured, there was nothing for those people either and that was where I did intervene. I did personally persuade the prime minister that we needed to do something for those people. So we created, in very short order, a scheme which I do believe has gone through the House now, to set up a compensation scheme for those people who were very badly affected.

CH: You've had two departures now from government, one was your own resignation from Theresa May's, and then leaving at the reshuffle earlier this year. How did the two experiences compare: what is it like leaving as a minister? Do you end up feeling frustrated at all the things that were left undone?

AL: You say one was by my own hand, the other was by the prime minister, but actually I think I've persuaded you that every time I've left a job, it's been like "oh no". Because I like to get things done. My own view is a year is too short a time to be in a job. And in BEIS, seven months was way too short a time to be in a job. In the leader's office, two years, I could have happily carried on. I loved that job and I was gutted to have to resign. I resigned because I was going to be asked to bring forward the Withdrawal Agreement Bill and within it the potential for a second referendum. That was on a matter of principle, I felt I had no choice. I recall I was going to resign earlier in the day, but I had a meeting of the Privy Council that evening (being lord president is possibly the most amazing thing about being leader of the Commons) so I couldn't do that because that would have been exceedingly discourteous to the Queen, apart from anything else. So I resigned when I got back and I really was deeply sad to leave that job. In terms of being sacked from BEIS, I was just totally astonished. Obviously, I had seen the press was saying she's going to get sacked, but then that always happened. It will be interesting to see whether it's more about women, but every job I've ever been in, at every reshuffle, it's 'Leadsom's going to get sacked'. It just seems to be par for the course. So I was absolutely amazed, I genuinely thought that I was doing an excellent job in BEIS – I know I'd had some run ins on policy matters with Number 10, but I thought that that was just part of the job as a secretary of state, to stand your ground. But yes, I still do not know why I was sacked from that job after only seven months, it makes no sense to me.

CH: What advice would you give to a new minister on how to be effective in office?

AL: The one piece of advice I would give to any new minister is to read everything you can about your brief. Get your private office to arrange for proper induction for you and don't allow all of the urgent and overdue things that overwhelm your inbox right from

the off to get in the way of learning about your job properly. It makes so much easier a life if you know what you're doing from early on.

CH: What achievement are you most proud of from your time in office?

AL: It's so hard to pin down just one thing. So I'm going to go for three. The first one was not so much effort, but I think had potentially a huge impact. That was as City minister, introducing the agreement with post offices to provide retail banking services for customers and businesses. That was working closely with the business department, and I do think it has helped many living in more rural communities when the last bank in town has left.

The second thing I want to mention is when I was leader of the House of Commons and introduced the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme. Now, that may have had a big impact only on the culture in parliament, but in terms of it being incredibly hard work and really difficult to get through, I think introducing a means to ensure people are treated with dignity and respect in future parliaments, it's something I am very proud of.

Then the third thing, the most politically difficult, but something I am personally very proud of, is the contribution I made to getting the United Kingdom out of the European Union.

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