

# Ministers Reflect

## Dr Andrew Murrison



26 January 2021

# Biographical details

## Parliamentary history

Since 2001: Conservative MP for South Wiltshire (formerly Westbury)

## Government career

2019–20: Minister of state for the Middle East and North Africa, joint Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development

2014–15: Parliamentary under secretary of state, Northern Ireland Office

2012–14: Parliamentary under secretary of state for international security strategy, Ministry of Defence

**Andrew Murrison was interviewed by Dr Catherine Haddon and Jo-Anna Hagen Schuller on 26 January 2021 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.**

**Andrew Murrison discusses the oddities of the Ministry of Defense and the Northern Ireland Office. He also reflects on the difference in impact he was able to have as a minister and a backbencher He talks about his role in the Great War centenary and as chair of the Northern Ireland Select Committee.**

Catherine Haddon (CH): Can we start with when you first joined government, in September 2012, as minister for international security at the Ministry of Defence (MoD)? Can you talk us through the appointment? How did you hear about it? Did you have a conversation with the prime minister?

Andrew Murrison (AM): Yes, I was called to Number 10 and had a conversation. It was brief. On each occasion that I have been appointed, the conversation has been brief and quick. So, it hasn’t been an exhaustive run through of ‘what I want you to do.’

CH: Did you have a sense of what your brief would be, or did you have that conversation with Philip Hammond [defence secretary, 2011–14]?

AM: No, I had that conversation with the secretary of state.

CH: What was it like then for your first day, going into the Ministry of Defence? What was the support like in inducting you into the role?

AM: Well, very good because you’re met, as you cross the road – in my case to the Ministry of Defence – by your private secretary and scooped up into the system. It runs extremely smoothly. The civil service is well-versed in these things, and they do it very well. It’s in their interests.

Jo-Anna Hagen (JH): You’d previously served in the armed forces. You’d also been shadow defence minister for three years, parliamentary private secretary (PPS) to Andrew Lansley [health secretary, 2010–12] and you’d written a review into healthcare for members of the service community. How did these experiences help you get up to speed on your brief and being a minister?

AM: I’ve been a shadow health minister and a shadow defence minister and that’s because, I think, I’d served 20 years in the armed forces, and I am a doctor. So, slightly unusually – my first appointment at any rate – had something vaguely to do with what I already knew. It gives you a depth and breadth which perhaps otherwise might be lacking. I think the difficulty many ministers have is coming into a brief and having to learn things very fast and appear credible.

That was particularly the case in the Blair/Brown years because they had a habit of churn, even more than subsequent administrations. You were changing every nine

months or so. That really is hopeless for most people in terms of getting a grip of the subject matter. Of course, that has implications for how you interact with civil servants and how they regard you. Since, if they have the sense, you're only going to be there for a short period of time, they needn't really bother with you. They know that there'll be another one along shortly. So, if they don't like what you're doing, or find it all too difficult, they will just sit on it in the sure and certain knowledge that somebody else will be along.

**CH: What were the areas of your brief that you particularly knew well because of your previous experience? How do you think they helped?**

**AM:** My particular brief within the Ministry of Defence was a little bit unusual. Defence diplomacy, that's essentially what it was. I spent a great deal of time overseas talking to my interlocutors. In a way, although I understand defence better than most MPs, within that, it wasn't perhaps the best appointment. I really ought to have been appointed as veterans' minister – or what's now called minister for defence people – because my experience had largely been on the people-facing part of defence, rather than the grand and strategic. So perhaps didn't fit quite as well as it might have done. But Number 10 in its wisdom decided to divvy things up in that way.

**CH: At that time many departments' budgets were being cut, thinking of austerity measures, the MoD was going through major change programmes and was implementing the defence review. What was morale like in the department? How big were the challenges?**

**AM:** Well, I didn't detect any particular problem with morale. There's a general sense in defence that they are in an industry that is declining, I think that's probably true to say. If you speak to most members of the armed forces, they'll say that it's dispiriting at times. All the while they are anticipating the next cut. That's not great. But if you work in a Whitehall department, it has a sort of an energy and dynamism of its own, you're perhaps less aware of some of the issues. You're immune from it to a certain extent, unless you get out and about or you've got contacts in the frontline, which I do.

**CH: The MoD was trying to fill the £38 billion black hole in the defence budget. Did you see much of the relationship with the Treasury in those issues?**

**AM:** Yes, it was a constant. Philip Hammond was obviously dealing with most of it. Constantly, in fact, and extremely well. I suppose, during the period of time I was there, it was omnipresent.

**CH: Can you tell us about working with the secretary of state? How did he work with his ministerial team? What kind of secretary of state did you find him to be?**

**AM:** I think it is probably true to say that he's perfectly agreeable, very able. Ambitious chap. I don't know how he regarded junior ministers. I think he certainly would see them as useful in dealing with some of the lower order issues. I don't think he saw them

massively in terms of being creative, in terms of policy. He had a very close relationship – MoD, of course, being a particular department – with his senior civil servants, people like John Thomson [permanent secretary at MoD, 2012–16] at the time.

Of course, the other string that applies in the MoD that doesn't apply in other departments is the chief of defence staff (CDS) and the service chiefs. That was on fairly tight hold, so junior ministers tended to be people who would deal with parliamentary colleagues, either informally or formally by way of debate, answering questions, doing some visits, that sort of thing. But as I say, I was slightly different because I spent most of my time travelling around the place because of the nature of my particular role.

**CH: The MoD is very different from other departments, with the mix of armed forces and civilians in Head Office. Is that different for a minister to experience, or does it not make a difference to what you were trying to do?**

**AM:** I think it is different in the MoD because you have to deal with the uniformed service as well as the civil service. I suspect it's more difficult for the perm sec [permanent secretary, the most senior civil servant in a department] to be honest. Because in most departments, the perm sec is basically the boss. As a minister, you need to understand that really, really early on. I think sometimes, because you're an elected person, you feel you have some sort of level of superiority. Well, you need to just be a bit careful because the perm sec is called permanent for a reason.

In MoD, it's a bit different. It would be interesting if you had a conversation with John Thomson actually. I'm not sure how he found it, because he was completely new to defence. A very able man, particularly useful when it comes to figures. But it would be interesting to know how he felt about things, given that there was this alternative strand through CDS and the defence chiefs, which doesn't apply in any other government department I can think of.

**CH: You were there for nearly two years. What were the achievements that you think you made and managed during that time? What are the takeaways that you're most proud of from that role?**

**AM:** It's very frustrating because it's difficult to put your finger on anything really. Because all of the departments that I've served in are 'policy-light'. There is very little legislation involved in either defence, Northern Ireland or the Foreign Office and DfID [then Department for International Development] – which are the departments I served in. So, you can't really claim ownership of anything specifically. The junior minister that possibly can get close to that is the veterans' minister who deals with the personnel side of things because of the various initiatives. And you've referred to the two papers I wrote which became government policy. You could argue that, as a backbencher, I was far more influential in creating policies than I was as a minister. I think that's probably true.

And you haven't referred to my role as prime minister's special representative for the Commemoration of the Centenary of the First World War. That was a major project over seven years which had a significant national and international output, and it was well done. I did that largely as a backbencher. It underscores that for me, in my career, it's been stuff I've done as a backbencher that appears to have had more influence in policy terms than many of the things I've done as a minister.

I think what we have to understand in this country is that what are called junior ministers – or middle-ranking ministers – in the UK are called assistant ministers in other jurisdictions. Really you are there to assist the principal, which is the secretary of state. Us junior ministers and ex-junior ministers perhaps don't like to put it in those terms, but that's probably the reality of it. So much of what I was doing at the MoD was to do with diplomacy and trying to get alongside people who are influential overseas. I think we did that reasonably successfully and our programme of work was quite ferocious at times. That's the answer I would give you to that particular question.

**JH: You were then appointed minister of state for Northern Ireland in July 2014. Is that a move you wanted? How did you get your head around your new briefing and establish your priorities?**

**AM:** Yes, interesting. I asked to do that, and the reason was... it was obviously a very small department, tiny department compared to the MoD. I suppose in reference to your previous question, there's a certain frustration as a junior minister that you're not being terribly influential in policy terms because you are one minister within a huge department with lots and lots of big figures, like CDS and service chiefs, senior civil servants and that sort of thing. So, I perceived I'd rather like to go to a smaller department, and I was just vaguely interested at that time in constitutional stuff, in particular the make-up the UK and in matters related to Northern Ireland. So, I actually asked if there was a reshuffle – and if I was retained in government – whether I could be considered for that job, which I was. So that's how that happened. I don't know, if I had not made that request, I might probably have stayed at the MoD. I have no idea.

**JH: Could you reflect a bit more on how the department compared to the MoD and maybe on your relationship with Theresa Villiers, your secretary of state?**

**AM:** Well, it was a tiny little department compared with the MoD. Again, quite an interesting and fascinating one because of its relationship with the civil service of Northern Ireland. It was basically a dual site in Stormont and in Westminster. It was like comparing chalk and cheese really. Again, a lot of routine stuff, you're the only junior minister, so doing quite a lot of the heavy lifting of the process work that has to be done within a ministry. I suppose I had more frequent access to the secretary of state.

When I was there, we were doing the Stormont House talks [talks on the power-sharing arrangements in Northern Ireland] with David Cameron in Belfast. So, a sense perhaps of being closer to some of the action at the time, very high profile, running up to a

difficult period with Brexit around the corner. But it was an interesting time with some interesting characters, like Martin McGuinness [deputy first minister of Northern Ireland, 2007–17]. People that certainly I knew, because of my demographic, from my youth. Suddenly, you're there in the room in talks with them, in discussions with them. So I suppose a sense of being in the thick of it in the way that perhaps was not the case at the MoD.

**CH: So, were you handling the relationships with everyone who was involved in getting to the agreement?**

**AM:** Yes, that's right. The bulk of it was done by Theresa Villiers but I did some of it, yeah.

**CH: What about, in terms of supporting the Northern Ireland executive? I mean, what kind of levers does the UK government use and rely on? Were they sufficient? Could it have been done better?**

**AM:** No, I think it worked quite well. I think there's a clear delineation of function between the civil service of Northern Ireland and Stormont House – which was obviously in abeyance at the time. That was the whole problem, a sense that it could be that the Northern Ireland Office had to take control again. That was the threat and the clear and present danger. Trying to think what that would mean in terms of function. Getting involved in the direction of education, healthcare and all these devolved matters, there was a lot of that going on. But at the end of the day, a sense that, at the 11th hour, there would be an accommodation that would avoid that, which, of course, the government was keen to avoid at all costs.

**CH: Northern Ireland is a very sensitive, political area. Did you do much political handling and thinking about the wider party? For many ministers, handling parliament is a big part of their role. What was your role?**

**AM:** If you're a Northern Ireland member of parliament, then clearly you're a subject matter expert and it's of overwhelming interest to you. But for the generality of members of parliament, it really isn't something of great interest because they perceive it's of no great interest to their constituents – except when things go badly wrong. You can identify which members of parliament are likely to ask questions and put you on the spot. Of course, the fact that Sinn Féin doesn't attend makes life, in a sense, easier for ministers. The questions therefore were always fairly predictable, I think it's true to say.

Which is just as well because, of course, Northern Ireland – unless you live there and you work there – is very specialist and you can very easily trip yourself up. You need to tread warily with such a brief and there are many ministers who have come to grief – I suppose not so much as Northern Ireland Office ministers but certainly as ministers in general – when they had to deal with matters relating to Northern Ireland. Later, when I was chairman of the select committee, we certainly saw that. You need to be on top of

it and understand the sensitivities and the significance of what you're saying and the words that you use which, in general – on the mainland – wouldn't really have too much significance, but in Northern Ireland really do. Everything you say has a political context.

**CH: Could you reflect a bit on the department as well? What was the support like from the civil service? Was there a lot of continuity in the staff that were supporting you? Did you feel like there was the strength and depth there?**

**AM:** Well, it's a small department so you're choosing from a much smaller pool of people. There's a fairly large crossover between the Northern Ireland civil service and the Northern Ireland Office. For example, my private secretary had worked as a civil servant in Northern Ireland and had then come to the Northern Ireland Office. I think if you have a small organisation, maybe it's more difficult – because the talent pool is smaller – to sometimes have the support maybe that we used to elsewhere. It doesn't have the feeling of being a fast-moving Rolls Royce operation in the way that some other departments of state have.

That's not to say in any way at all that I felt badly served as Northern Ireland Office minister. It's just the way of working appeared to be different to me. I wasn't there for that long, so perhaps if I had been then perhaps my views might have evolved. But that's just a kind of general sense. I mean it was delightful, it really was. But very often, one didn't necessarily get the sense of being in a really, really happening department full of the brightest and the best, in the way that one would have done in a large department. Now the ways of dealing with that, possibly, is to allow a larger level of crossover between central government departments. The problem with that is, of course, as I've said, Northern Ireland is very specialist. And specialist knowledge is important. So, you need to have, I think, that depth of understanding. There are obviously other issues as well that relate to the way that organisations in Northern Ireland are constituted for very good reasons. It is much more complicated.

**CH: You left government after the general election in May 2015. What was it like going back into the backbenches at that time?**

**AM:** I was a bit disappointed and I was a bit surprised to be perfectly honest. It wasn't great. But these things happen. I've no idea why, and one of the disappointing things, I think for most ex-ministers, is the manner of their departure and the failure to furnish an explanation. Man-management, in terms of ministers concerned, is abysmal and wouldn't be tolerated in any other walk of life. You're there at the pleasure of the prime minister. He can hire and fire you at will and without giving a credible explanation. You just have to suck it up basically. Those are the terms and conditions. If you don't like it, stay on the backbenches – that would be my advice. You'll be given lots of warm words, usually from the chief whip. He'll promise you things to keep you on side. But experience tells you that that needs to be taken, if not with a pinch of salt, then with a whole shedload of reservations. So there it is.



It's a pity because I think actually a read out of the situation, an honest one, is a positive thing. People need to be empowered to say, well, actually you've left because we thought you were lacklustre. Or we sacked you because we needed more women, or whatever. Or you're too old, things like that. I think we just need to be upfront with people. That would be my feeling. That would cause less disenchantment. As it happens, it was quite a good thing for me because I then went on to chair the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. It was probably one of the more rewarding things I had done for two years. Unfortunately, I was beguiled back and then became a Foreign Office and DfID minister, which was a super job which I enjoyed enormously. Then again, not very long after that, having given up my chairmanship and all that went with that, I was returned to the backbenches by Boris Johnson, which was a lot worse than 2015. Not least because I had supported Boris and because I had given up the select committee chairmanship, which I found to be hugely more influential than, certainly, my first two jobs had been. That was a great sadness.

**CH: Can we talk a bit about the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. You were elected chair in 2017, when the Northern Ireland executive collapsed. This must have been a very unusual situation for a select committee, because it was one of the only scrutiny mechanisms left. Did that change your role there?**

**AM:** I enjoyed that particular job very much. Remember, I was elected by the whole House for this, so you have a certain punch. I'm sure elsewhere you've studied the influence, or otherwise, of a select committee chairman. And the reason they're influential is because they are elected by the House rather than the creature of the person appointing them, subject to summary dismissal, which I've just discussed. The chairmanship of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, I think, is a significant job at any time. But at that time, it was particularly significant and therefore particularly rewarding. Two things. Firstly, Stormont was in abeyance, and secondly, we had Brexit, with all the issues around the border. Of course, in 2016, we weren't really thinking about the Northern Ireland dimension, but it became really the whole centrepiece of the Brexit process and debate around the border, which continues. Those two things made those two years I had as chairman of the select committee particularly interesting.

I think the fact that the Stormont assembly was in abeyance meant that we had to consider things – well, I chose to consider things – which really weren't any of our business. We did studies in health and education, which if Simon Hoare [Conservative chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee since 2019] were to try to do it now, he would be told by the Northern Ireland assembly rightly to butt out, because it's devolved. But I took the view that the only little vestige of democracy open to the people of Northern Ireland at that time was through our select committee processes. We were doing scrutiny when others weren't. I was very proud of the work. In fact, we were the most productive select committee, during my chairmanship, of any of them and I think that was part of the reason. But the Brexit thing was great because, of

course, it was nationally the big issue and Northern Ireland at that time was front and centre. Genuinely it was really, massively good, and I feel really privileged to have chaired that select committee at that time.

**JH: Let's move on to your role at the FCO [then Foreign and Commonwealth Office] and DfID as joint minister, re-joining government in 2019, after four years. How was it this time round? And had chairing a select committee changed your approach to being a minister?**

**AM:** Yeah, so there would have been a lot of competition for that particular job because anything in the Foreign Office is seen as being highly desirable and rightly so. I was probably appointed in part because I'd done quite a lot as a backbencher – not least the Great War commemoration stuff – and internationally. I was also a prime ministerial trade envoy, which I am now again. I think those were the reasons. Theresa May had no particular reason to appoint me since I'd been quite difficult in the past but to her credit, she did. It was a significant step up because it involved membership of Privy Council and all the rest of it. Quite influential, quite significant, lots of foreign travel, lots of talking with foreign VIPs, lots of time in aeroplanes.

In terms of the select committee stuff and the relevance to that, I suppose the fact that I have been involved with the Stormont House talks might have been useful. It's very difficult to put a finger on it, but certainly in negotiation and talking to people it made me a little... a little bit more acute than I otherwise might have been. So yeah, I think probably it was. But I was a bit surprised to be appointed in a sense because obviously my demographic is not in the ascendancy and there's always the sort of sense if you're a middle-aged male that the plum jobs are going to be given to others for political reasons. I was rather surprised to be appointed to that job. But it was a great job and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was very, very disappointed and somewhat surprised – as it would appear others were too – of being dismissed.

**JH: What was it like being a joint minister? Did the two departments – as they were then before they merged into the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office – work well together?**

**AM:** Well, I thought they did and increasingly so. The amalgamation of the two departments is something I actually supported, have done consistently. But in truth, they'd been coming closer together for a long time. The fascinating thing is that culturally and historically, international development and the Foreign Office are very, very separate indeed. In London and also on the ground. They have been coming much, much closer together over several years. I was quite surprised actually at how fast this amalgamation happened, at how rapidly it happened. But when it did happen, it seemed to go off fairly smoothly and indeed without too much in the way of criticism, public criticism. There was a bit in *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, but not a great deal. I think it's gone very well and it's very positive. As with all these things, the

difficulty is very often the sort of nuts and bolts, so things like terms and conditions of service in DfID were much better than in the FCO. I'm not quite sure – because I've now left – how those things have been finessed and resolved. I'm assuming in a sort of a TUPE [Transfer of Undertakings, Protection of Employment, regulations protecting employees of UK businesses changing owners] type fashion. There is still a difference between old DfID staff and old FCO staff. But I'm not sure.

**JH: You mentioned that you were trade envoy for Morocco and Tunisia, trying to secure, future trade deals with them after Brexit. What was it like to practically deliver on the implementation side of Brexit?**

**AM:** When I was at the FCO, I signed the association agreement with Morocco, which was basically rolling over our relationship that we had by virtue of our membership of the European Union. There was a lot of disappointment in Morocco that we weren't going further faster. The process is still ongoing, and we hope to have a broader and deeper relationship with Morocco in the years to come. Because, of course, Morocco is only a middling economy I suppose you could say, and government bandwidth has been largely taken up with dealing with the big beasts. Hopefully the potential for closer working with Morocco will be exploited further in the months and years ahead. That's the hope.

I think having been a minister in FCO is very helpful in terms of what I'm doing now as a trade envoy and trying to work out where we go from here and the sorts of things that we might make progress on, the sectoral things. The whole thing about trade envoys is they are meant to be people who have some understanding of the country and real in-depth knowledge and breadth of knowledge of the country. Not necessarily at ministerial level, but I think it helps. Some of the most effective trade envoys are people who have had some ministerial experience, I would say. The temptation is just to use it as a form of patronage. I think that's a mistake. I think it's also a mistake to appoint trade envoys to every single country. There's been a bit of grade inflation. I think that would be risky. You have to appoint these folks strategically, in my opinion, if they're going to be respected by interlocutors, because your interlocutors will pick this stuff up, because their embassies in London will advise them. If you are to make a difference, there needs to be a sense that you have the ear of the prime minister, and you are somebody that it is worth investing time and effort with to build up a relationship. That's a separate conversation. I think I could blather on for a long time about trade envoys.

**CH: Maybe it's something that we should come back to.**

**AM:** What I would recommend you do is do a study on extra ministerial appointments. I've had two. In fact, I've had probably three. I've referred to the Great War stuff and at that time I was appointed, in 2011, that role was just developing. I think one can be slightly cynical about these unpaid appointments, but actually they've been quite

significant over the past 10 years or so. I've just said, I feel as a backbencher I've been more influential in policy terms than I have been as a junior minister, trying to firefight all the time.

**CH: You were saying that you were disappointed to leave your ministerial role for a second time. Was there any difference in terms of like... how did you hear about it, and did you get any kind of feedback this time or was it the same as last time?**

**AM:** No, I think it's worse this time because Boris just phoned me – I can tell you exactly – at 20 minutes past eight in the morning. I knew it was reshuffle day, and I had two of my daughters having breakfast in the House of Commons and my private office phoned me in a panic saying “Number 10's trying to get hold of you.”. You know full well if it's early in the morning, it's probably not going to be good news. So, with Boris, less than a minute on the phone in the sort of normal Boris way. And he's got a good way of making you feel good even if he's delivering bad news. So that's what he did, he said go and speak to the chief whip about it and that was it. He moved onto the next person he was dealing with before giving the good news to people who were getting appointed. There's no nice way of doing these things. It was pretty brutal to be perfectly honest.

**CH: You talked about how important it is to have the ear of the prime minister as a trade envoy. How much interaction did you have with prime ministers in your ministerial roles more generally? Do you have any reflections on the different approaches and how that affects being a minister?**

**AM:** The answer is, as a junior minister, you have very little to do with the prime minister. Let's be blunt. You have access to him. If you want to see him, you will. Your secretary of state is going to be fairly upset if you're forever trying to go behind his back, it's probably true to say. I think junior ministers with particular policy responsibilities, where you're working up a particular item, probably have a little bit more to do with Number 10 and the Cabinet Office directly. But as a run-of-the-mill junior minister, I think the public would be quite surprised at how little interface you have. Getting back to my role in the Great War commemorations, for example, I attended cabinet twice. I sat in cabinet and briefed on what we were doing for cabinet. I never had that experience as a junior minister.

**CH: Reflecting overall on your experience, is there more that you think could be done to help junior minister is be more effective?**

**AM:** Yeah, well, I think perhaps we just need to make it clear to junior ministers that your job is to support the secretary of state. He's the principal. Indeed, ex-secretaries of state, would probably say increasingly, there's a frustration that everything's run by the Cabinet Office and the Treasury, as well as Number 10, and their actual scope, their room for manoeuvre, is finite.

Really what I'd say to ministers is you need to try to work out what it is you are going to do and what you hope to achieve within an expected timeframe. You should be able to expect a full two years in a post, I would suggest. I think it's bonkers to sack people who are performing before that. Why would you even do that? I mean, it's crazy. It's crazy. It wouldn't be tolerated in any other organisation. I would say that assume that you're not going to mess up, and assume you're going to be there for two years. What is it at the end of that two years you will want to have achieved? You need to work that out very early in your tenure and not be diverted by all the firefighting stuff, answering the UQs [urgent questions] and so on. The Foreign Office was great at this, because the number of UQs come fast and furious and they clear the diary. You can't do anything else. Try not to be distracted by that. Just try to work out, very early on, what you want to achieve and go for it and hold your civil servants to account for delivering those things. That would be my advice, but you probably will have got a similar message from others. It's easy to say that, far more difficult to do it.

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