

# Ministers Reflect Baroness Warsi



24 April 2017

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# Biographical details

## Parliamentary career

2007– present: Conservative Member of the House of Lords

## Government and opposition career

2012–14: Senior Minister of State (Foreign and Commonwealth Office jointly with Department for Communities and Local Government)

2010–12: Minister without Portfolio (Cabinet Office), and Co-Chair of the Conservative Party

2007–10: Shadow Minister for Sheffield, and Shadow Minister for Community Cohesion and Social Action

2005–07: Vice-Chairman of the Conservative Party

2004–05: Community Relations Adviser to Leader of the Opposition

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**Baroness Warsi was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Daniel Thornton on 24 April 2017 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project.**

Sayeeda Warsi looks back on her time in the Coalition government starting with figuring out what exactly was a Minister without Portfolio. She explains how her commitment to results and hands-on approach with civil servants led to her two proudest achievements: the Sukuk and Srebrenica Memorial Day.

**Nicola Hughes (NH):** Back in 2010 you became both the Conservative Party Chair and a minister without a portfolio. Can you tell us what the minister without a portfolio job involved? What was it like not being part of a departmental team as such?

**Baroness Warsi (BW):** One of the things that I now look back on and realise is how unprepared I was for government. I didn’t come from the world of politics. My political career had been relatively short before I got into government. We came to a couple of sessions here [at the Institute for Government], but when you’re in the throes of preparing for government, these sessions didn’t seem to land well. I felt that the preparation going into government, i.e. the nuts and bolts of how government works, wasn’t entirely clear. I was delivered the double whammy of being given a job with no job description: Minister without Portfolio. At the time, I remember thinking, “What does this mean?” I had to go away and Google ‘a minister without a portfolio’! Peter Mandelson came up on the search results, so I went, “OK that sounds quite serious!” I remember speaking to my dad, who was constantly ringing me up, because he knew I had gone into Downing Street. He asked, “What is the job you are doing?” I told him and tried to explain, to which he still said it didn’t make any sense to him.

I think for me it was more difficult than for other colleagues. If you’re a secretary of state for x, you have a permanent secretary and you are introduced into a role that the machinery of government understands. Whereas I was told, “It is a full Cabinet position, it is the Minister without Portfolio, it is Party Chairman, I’d like you to do the kind of things that you do”, and that was that. I didn’t know which department I was going to sit in, where my office was going to be. Whether I was going to have an office in government as well as the party? Where the dividing lines were? Where did politics end and government start? It was a really difficult tightrope to walk. That was the difficult side of it. The good thing was that nothing was off-limits. I was given a green light to become chief interferer! So if I was interested in any area of law or any area of policy making, as long as the Prime Minister cleared it, I was allowed to do it. So I did bits of DCLG [Department of Communities and Local Government] and bits of foreign policy, before I took those jobs up formally in 2012. There were so many different spaces that I ended up getting involved in; Cabinet Office, constitutional stuff. So, in a way, it was a brilliant job because I wasn’t boxed in.

But from a procedural perspective it was a difficult job because I didn’t have a perm sec [permanent secretary], there were no clearly defined lines of communication and

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accountability. There was nobody you could turn to, who could tell you what was and wasn't OK. For example, there was nobody to sit down with, in the early days, who could take me through all my forms around business interests, conflicts and other procedural matters. The things that normally just happen for ministers at the beginning just didn't happen.

**NH: That's really interesting. We will come back to the move to the 2012 job. You'd been a lawyer for many years before moving into politics, are there any particular skills that you think you brought from law and from the outside world into the ministerial world?**

**BW:** Yes. I think the ability to make a case, to be an advocate, to be able to present at the dispatch box. I know people who worry about the dispatch box, and I have seen ministerial colleagues get very nervous before a parliamentary debate. For me it felt like I was back in court making the case; being able to take quick questions, thinking on your feet. I think as a lawyer you bring all of these skills to the ministerial role. What I think is completely different is that in law if the evidence is there and you make the case, most often you can predict the result. Whereas in politics it had less to do with the evidence and the case that you were making, and more to do with where your friendships were, how the media viewed you and how, for example, the conservative commentators saw you. So you're not being judged just on your ability to do the job. You're being judged on your PR. And I wasn't great at PR. I found that side of it really uncomfortable. I think if you don't do that well, it eventually starts to impact on your ability to do the job.

**NH: What about the parliamentary side of things?**

**BW:** So for the first two years there wasn't much parliamentary work, because I was Party Chairman. I wasn't taking any legislation through. But to be fair, I had been in shadow cabinet so I had taken legislation through Parliament before, that side of it didn't really concern me. It was more the political stuff: parliamentary liaison with my colleagues in the Commons around campaigning, constituency work, selections and elections. That was really my parliamentary work, liaison rather than debating legislation.

**NH: And then you moved onto the 2012 job [Senior Minister of State for the Foreign Office and Minister of State for Faith and Communities]. Did you know in advance you were getting this new post?**

**BW:** You may recall that at the time, David [Cameron] called in a number of people the night before the reshuffle and basically said, "I'm going to move you and this is what I am going to ask you to do." It was a gentler way of doing it, rather than getting you to walk up and down Downing Street. He probably did it not knowing how some people were going to react. He offered me a job which I turned down, and he said, "Well, that's what's on offer, take it or leave it." I recall telling him that it was not a job I wanted to do. That may sound like an arrogant thing to say as it was a Cabinet job but I felt that the sacrifices that came with frontline politics in terms of family and living away from home were too great to be doing a job that I was not interested in or excited by.

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Having decided to leave, I signed off my Chairman’s Twitter account. I was known as the minister who resigned by Twitter but I didn’t realise I was resigning! I thought I was simply saying, “Guys, see you later”, I thought I had already been told to go anyway. So I put a tweet out saying signing off, Party Chairman, signing on to my personal account. My husband had driven down because he knew this was all happening; I’d wanted to talk to him about it before making the final decision. So after I’d informed Number 10 I jumped in the car with him and we went back to Yorkshire. In the early hours of the next day I received a call from Number 10 asking, “What’s this about you resigning?” I am convinced Number 10 thought my answer was a negotiation process but for me it wasn’t, it genuinely was that I didn’t want to do the job.

After a number of calls from colleagues, we finally agreed upon a role. I was asked to come straight back to London. In retrospect, it was a silly 24 hours and it was a really odd way of putting a Cabinet together.

**NH: So you got to then carve out your role, how did you decide what your biggest priorities would be?**

**BW:** Well, I think there were two things. The concept of faith and the public sphere was really important to me, issues around hate crime were important to me, freedom of religion and belief was a priority both domestically and internationally. So there were a number of things I wanted to get going. One was The Big Iftar, which is now running, it was a bit like The Big Lunch (an initiative to encourage community get-togethers) but focused on opening up mosques and getting that engagement. Another was about remembrance for the Srebrenica genocide, because I had done a lot of work in Sarajevo and in Bosnia previously, including Project Maja which we’d started in Bosnia in 2007. I know it sounds like an odd list but I had a whole list of things which I wanted to get delivered and so literally I carved out a role which would allow me to deliver my priorities. Most were already projects that I was working on as the Minister without Portfolio, both in DCLG and the Foreign Office. I thought that if I was actually placed in those departments, that would allow me to carry on and see these initiatives through. I did and I managed to deliver.

I say this to a lot of people now, that when you go into government you will be overwhelmed with the amount of paper shuffling that goes on, the number of debates you have to do in Parliament, the number of visits you have to do, all of the handshaking you have to do. You can either start resenting all of that or you can just go with the flow, ignore what you want to do and just be taken along with the wave. There are ministers who have had successful political careers by simply being taken along with the flow. Or you can say, “OK – I will do all that paperwork but this is the list of priorities that I want to deliver when I am in government.” Then you go in with that list, and have a weekly meeting on each of those items, which is what I did. So you ensure that time in government is also used to deliver the things you are passionate about, you can see what you achieved and what would not have happened had you not been in government.

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**NH: Now that you were a minister with departments and permanent secretaries and directors and so on, did that make a difference in getting that list of priorities done?**

**BW:** It did and it didn't. As Minister without Portfolio, I didn't report to anybody but the Prime Minister. As the Minister at DCLG, I now had two Secretaries of State that I had to report into. I was lucky that it was Eric [Pickles] and William [Hague]. I'd eventually just wear down Eric enough to be able to get what I wanted. With William I would argue the case intellectually enough to convince him to support what I wanted. They were both great to work with, but I now had two immediate bosses, whereas before my immediate boss was the Prime Minister. So it did change the dynamics. I couldn't just go and see David in the way I would before, and say, "What do you think of this?" David gave people quite a wide bandwidth within which to operate. He was known to be quite trusting and would let you get on with things. I think I was acutely aware of the politics of doing that in the new role – with two Secretaries of State, I didn't want to feel I was undermining them. I attended Cabinet as a kind of an equal to my two Secretaries of State because I sat round the table with them. It was quite difficult navigating those relationships and making sure I paid due regard to the fact they were the Secretary of State and I wasn't.

**NH: You were based in two departments, but a lot of the issues you worked on cut across government. What reflections do you have on how well government works across silos?**

**BW:** It doesn't. I think having ministers at the minister of state level across two departments is a really good idea, giving people two half-jobs. It forces you to think differently. For the role that I did, there was a clear domestic and an international aspect. I felt that my job split that perfectly. I definitely believe in cross-cutting departments, because unless it is the ministers' job, it is not going to happen. More and more I found that much of what happened in government was about political will. It was because some minister decided they weren't going to take their foot off the gas. The minute they did, it stopped happening. Civil servants have a set idea of what's going to happen. I remember when I went into the Foreign Office, they gave me all these briefings, overwhelmed me with lots of paperwork, told me what the priorities were, told me what I wanted to do. I thought fine, and I did that for about six weeks. Then I sat everybody down and said, "That's really nice, it's really kind of you, now let me tell you what we are really going to do." Then I lay out my priorities and whilst the answer often was, "Yes, minister, no, minister, three bags full, minister", they didn't necessarily change their priorities! It makes you think, "What's the point of having ministers?" – what is the point of individuals and the uniqueness they bring as a minister, being in that job, if actually all civil servants want is someone to stick a paw print on a document at the end of the day. I think civil servants find that really hard to understand. I know of ministers who were really well liked in government by civil servants because they never ever went against civil service advice and always just did as they were told.

My experience in government was that I had civil servants who I had amazing relationships with. I still have those relationships. People I still go out for a drink or

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dinner with. But then there were other civil servants who probably thought I was a devil!

**Daniel Thornton (DT): Where was it a real struggle to get them to do things?**

**BW:** Human rights. The human rights department seemed to be not a very fashionable place to be. DCLG as a department seemed to attract less-able civil servants. It was almost as if there was a ranking of the departments people wanted to work in and DCLG were pretty much towards the bottom. I was acutely aware of this, because I had been in the Foreign Office with all these super all-singing, all-dancing, firing-on-all-cylinders civil servants. Then I would meet civil servants in DCLG and they sent me briefing papers with obvious statements or advice in, like ‘Christmas is a Christian festival’, it was very frustrating.

**DT: Where were you successful in getting them to change?**

**BW:** Well, what’s interesting was that the year after I left, the FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] finally held a conference that I had been asking them to arrange for nearly two years before I left. Some of the people I had worked with at the FCO called me to tell me that officials had “taken your paper which you fought for and delivered it as their own”.

**DT: What was this on?**

**BW:** This was on freedom of religion and belief. In the end, I thought it was fine, it might not have happened on my watch, but the fact that in the end it did happen meant that at some point I had clearly changed things. I came from the private sector, I was a lawyer for many years, I owned my own practice, I ran a manufacturing business, so I came in very results focused. What I found was you could keep pulling and keep pulling and nothing happened at the other end. Sometimes you were aware that people came along and said ‘Yes’, with no intention of ever delivering what you wanted them to deliver.

**DT: Do you think that it was the civil service didn’t agree with it, it wasn’t part of their plans, or was it that the Secretary of State had other priorities?**

**BW:** It wasn’t the Secretary of State, because I would clear things off politically. You see, one of the things that civil servants like saying to you is, “Oh, minister, I would love to do that, but minister x says this, and the Prime Minister – or some vague person in Number 10 – says y.” You have to ask them exactly who in Number 10, or go and speak to the PM directly. So you had to make sure that you had unplugged the political stuff first. Even then, it sometimes didn’t happen. Individual civil servants had their own view of what had to be delivered. Often it felt like ministers were just an inconvenience.



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**NH:** So if a minister came to you today and said “I’m having trouble, I have got these proposals and I can’t get the civil servants to respond to them”, what would be your reply as to how to get the civil servants working on your priorities?

**BW:** Get them to send you a one-page document of what they understood from the meeting, or what they’ve agreed to do, in writing. Bring that piece of paper out at every meeting thereafter, every seven days you have a meeting and make it happen.

**NH:** So you were hands-on in holding them to account?

**BW:** Yes. I used to have a weekly meeting. I used to call in everybody that was relevant to the delivery of my priorities, I kept a diary and extensive notes and would hold people to account against what was agreed and what progress had been made between meetings. They knew this meeting would take place on a weekly basis. But it was hard work. At times I felt frustrated because we were all supposed to be on the same team, so why were we wasting energy on fighting each other, when we should have just been getting on with the job? But also I’d much prefer civil servants coming along saying, “I don’t agree with you and I’m not going to do it”, rather than putting things off. That’s the other thing; civil servants find it really hard to say no.

**DT:** So they didn’t say that to you?

**BW:** No. They’d just tell you, “Yes, of course”, or stay silent and not do anything but I had such a wide brief in both the DCLG and the FCO [that] I could be away on foreign travel and by the time I got back, weeks could have passed and no progress had been made. I think that’s where your private office comes into play. I had a brilliant private office in the end. I went out and selected people, brought them into my private office and gave them brief responsibilities. They would make sure they continued pushing and making things happen whilst I wasn’t there. So my private office became my enforcement office. I was also lucky that the PM [Prime Minister] had allocated me two special advisers and they helped keep political priorities at the top of the agenda.

**DT:** And given all of your time in government, what were you most proud of achieving?

**BW:** One, I was a contactable minister. So if you rang me at 2am, I picked up the phone. One of the things that I hear regularly now from groups, individuals and activists, is that there’s nobody to talk to. I would always take the call and get my team to follow it up. I think ministers need to be like that. It’s exhausting because you’re on call literally 24 hours a day. But that’s why I think as a short burst it works really well, I did it for 4.5 years. You have got to be connected at the grassroots level all the time. That means you’re not learning about it just from civil servants. I think the most wonderful thing for me was to always know more than my civil servants. Towards the end of my job, because of the civil service churn, I knew so much more about my role than most of my officials. David kept his ministers in post for longer periods.

In terms of policy, there are two things. The first was probably delivering the Sukuk, the Islamic Finance Bond. Tony Blair talked about it, Gordon Brown talked about it and industry experts were convinced that it would never happen. We actually made it



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happen. It went down to the wire. It was that moment of 'I am not taking my foot off the gas and I'm going to make sure this happens'. It was just brilliant being there when David announced it.

The second policy achievement is the Srebrenica Memorial Day. It has been a big thing for me. It was during my lifetime, we turned a blind eye to what was happening within Europe's borders. During my twenties, I always looked at the Srebrenica genocide and thought that given it happened on European soil, where were we? Why did we not feel we could have done more? And today we are the only country in the European Union that has a formal Srebrenica Day. It is largely funded by government, although it's got external funding as well. It's taken hundreds of young people and opinion formers across to Srebrenica. It has got a massive education project. It is now working in collaboration with the Holocaust Memorial Trust. It is just one of those amazing things which started up as an idea I wrote up in 2008 and, a decade on, what fascinates me is when people send me invites to Remembering Srebrenica events saying, "You might have heard of this initiative and we would like you to come and speak." And that's when I think, that's it, it's actually embedded now and it will keep on running even if I am not there to keep my foot on the gas.

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