

Ministers reflect

David Hanson

May 2016



David Hanson – biographical details

Electoral History

1992-present: Labour Member of Parliament for Delyn

Parliamentary Career

2015-present: Shadow Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Minister

2011-2015: Shadow Policing Minister

2010-2011: Shadow Financial Secretary to the Treasury

May-Oct 2010: Shadow Minister at the Home Office, Ministry of Justice and HM Treasury

2009-2010: Minister of State for Security, Counter-Terrorism, Crime and Policing

2007-2009: Minister of State for Justice

2005-2007: Minister of State for Northern Ireland

2001-2005: Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Prime Minister

1999-2001: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales

1998-1999: Junior Government Whip

David Hanson was interviewed by Nicola Hughes and Jo Casebourne on 25th May 2016 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect Project.

Nicola Hughes (NH): I know you've done a few ministerial jobs and you were a whip and a PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary] first as well. But when you first started as a minister, what was that experience of coming into office like?

David Hanson (DH): Do you want me to start with the Whips' Office or with a proper minister?

NH: Start with the proper minister - it would be interesting to know how the Whips' Office prepared you for that.

DH: Well, I'll do that first then. In the Whips' Office, I went into government after six years on the backbenches. And then I had one year as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Alistair Darling [then Chief Secretary to the Treasury] in the first year of the Labour Government, when everything was new. The six years was great, but I didn't... I felt prepared when I went in after having had six years on the backbenches to understand what was going on. And the Whips' Office was a great training ground for me, because I saw things that I hadn't seen as a backbench MP. I saw the public-facing bits of parliamentary activity that I hadn't done; I'd never done statutory instruments, I hadn't done whipping of a bill committee before, so the Whips' Office was a good preparation. And a lot of the back-room stuff, about negotiations with the then opposition, or discussions within government about achieving things, or going into Cabinet sub-committees, that was a complete mystery prior to going to the Whips' Office. So it was a good preparation to going into what was the first job I had, which was the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales.

In terms of preparation for that, there was broadly none, apart from the fact that I'd obviously had been, outside of Parliament, I'd led my local council, I'd been a director of a charity, I'd had management training experience, a management role in the previous jobs I'd had. But I went to be a minister when I was about 38, 39 years old, no, maybe 41, yeah, 41 – so I'd had six years in Parliament and then 15 years outside of Parliament doing effectively management roles.

So for me, it was a shock in the sense that the first thing... it was trepidation because it was actually going from being a backbencher, being a whip and then going to the frontline, where you're in the frontline, and that was quite a shock, but it wasn't a managerial shock it was just a sort of 'Oh my god, this is my responsibility now to do certain things, and I have to clear that with the Secretary of State and I've got to understand what I'm doing...' In the first job, [I had] a relatively small private office and a relatively small area of responsibility, but the job I took over then was just at the time when devolution had just been agreed and the new assembly had just been established so it was very much, you know, trying to make sure that all went smoothly. And it was quite interesting. But it wasn't too difficult in the first job.

NH: And what about subsequent jobs?

DH: Subsequent jobs, I mean probably the biggest one I had, that was the biggest initial 'Wow, hell, this is going to be hard!', was when I got a phone call from the Prime Minister, having done four years with him in Downing Street, and then being told the day after the General Election I'm going to Northern Ireland, where I'd had no contact with Northern Ireland politics, and I had all the layers of Northern Ireland politics at the same time then, as there wasn't a devolved government. So I arrived in Northern Ireland and I was the Treasury Minister, I was the Sports Minister, I was the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of the Assembly. I was... what else was I? I was the Housing Minister and I was then the Non-Devolved Security Minister and Political Development Minister dealing with sentencing, policing and then trying to work and do the peace process at the same time. So I remember vividly flying on the plane to Northern Ireland thinking 'Bloody hell', you know, 'Bloody hell!' [laughter] And you walked into

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this and then I had six private secretaries because I had a private secretary for each department. So you were juggling literally six departments, trying to make decisions and I suppose the hardest thing you've got there is trying to find your niche, not in terms of direction and management, but actually in terms of, 'Well, who's doing what?' because the Prime Minister's involved in certain things, the Secretary of State's involved in certain things, there's a whole pile of things been done by your predecessor that you're picking up, there's agendas the civil servants want to give to you, then there's two or three things you think, actually, having thought about this over the first couple of weeks, I'd like to do. So trying to pull that all together is quite challenging.

NH: And how long did it take you to get your head round this new brief?

DH: Well, again, it takes a while and that's part of the problem with ministerial life. I mean, when I went to the Prisons Department as Prisons Minister, I'd had no real contact with prisons before that, apart from the bit in Northern Ireland that I was dealing with. So any new brief takes a while to get your head round. But you're not employed for detailed knowledge really, you're employed for judgement, you're employed for delivery, you're employed for front-of-house skills, you're employed for managing people. So in a sense, although you don't know a lot about the topic, sometimes if the topic is... you know, I'll paraphrase it, the topic is 'We need a piece of fruit for lunch today', well, the Civil Service might come up and say 'Well, here's a banana, here's an orange, here's an apple, this is the cost of each, this is what each do in energy values, this is how you will have to choose'; you choose. And that is a judgement issue, it's not necessarily knowing the individual qualities of an apple, an orange and a banana. It's a judgement issue and that's why, again, when you go into circumstances, even like in Northern Ireland, when I'd had an initial round of briefings, my job is to make judgements and to liaise with people and to have personal relationships and to be front-of-house and to hold people to account who are doing things, that are recommending to me and taking decisions on their recommendations. And cross-referencing them when they're coming to me to say, 'We think we should choose the banana, Minister', I've got to cross-reference them and challenge them as to why we're choosing the banana, so that when I go outside, having chosen the banana, I can justify it to the public at large that are going to be having a go at me.

So although it's important to have that knowledge, I didn't know the intricacies of the 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland. I didn't know, apart from what I knew of background about the different personalities who were in the IRA [Irish Republican Army], the Real IRA and so on. I didn't know the officials. I didn't know the intricacies of the housing challenges or the cultural challenges or the sporting challenges. But you soon embed yourself in that, because that's what you do. And when you get into that mode, you're making political judgements based on your values, but in Northern Ireland, free of the need to be accountable to the public [laughter] so actually you've got a little bit more freedom there, because you're not going to stand for election in Northern Ireland. But in normal circumstances that's what you've got to work your way through.

NH: Did you ever, in moving to new departments, did you ever have any additional support or maybe any kind of handover with predecessors?

DH: No, not really. No, no. In fact one of the most difficult things, I mean this has happened in the prisons job, is I arrived after two years in Northern Ireland to go to the brand new Ministry of Justice (MoJ). I'm told the day before that we're going to the brand new Ministry of Justice, so I end up leaving Northern Ireland on Tuesday, starting in the brand new Ministry of Justice on Wednesday. At half past 11 on Wednesday morning, I'm doing a statement in the Commons, because Charlie Falconer [then Justice Secretary] is in the Lords, about the responsibilities of the department. I've also then got a pile of stuff that the previous people have done, when it was in the Home Office, that I'm still seeing through as the minister which I've had no dealing with, but which is three-quarters of the way through, for example, the probation bill at the time. So you're stuck with a position whereby you've got a whole baggage, and this is part of the problem of going into ministries halfway through, is you've got a pile of

baggage from the predecessor that you have to see through and then make judgements on and probably not change very much – at the same time then as deciding what the department’s challenges are to you, what the political challenges are. We had a **big prisons space crisis [on] day one**, and then you’ve got things, after a while, that you think you would like to do. I was the longest serving Prisons Minister in the history of the Labour Party and I did two years one month and then went to the Home Office.

Then in the Home Office, just out of interest, as a little aside, in the Home Office I was working on something in the Prisons Department that I did from the Prisons Department – I went to the Home Office and my very first meeting was a brief against what I’d been arguing in the Prisons Department! [laughter] I said to the officials at the time, ‘Well, I’m not going to do that because actually I’ve been working on this for the last two years.’ So there’s no joined-up government.

It’s about judgement, in answer to that question, it’s about going into a department, you see what the officials’ agenda is, you see what your predecessor’s agenda is, because most times you have a predecessor unless it’s 1997 or 2010, and then you make judgements on it and then you, within that, as well as going through the mesh of day-to-day business, you find one or two things you think, ‘Well, actually, I can make a difference on that and I’ll focus on that myself.’

NH: I’ll come on to what you focussed on and priorities in a second, but it’s interesting, a lot of ministers say what you’re just saying about getting thrown into a new department very quickly and you have to start off in a new brief the next day. Do you think that’s a system that could be different or is it just a political reality?

DH: I think that’s probably a political reality, because in the sense if you said to me as a prime minister, ‘David, you’re going to go to the Ministry of Justice in three months and you’re going to do Gerry Sutcliffe’s job’, then Gerry’s a dead man walking for three months, isn’t he? Because nothing’s going to happen, so therefore it’s probably a reality of that. But, in a sense, what the Prime Minister, I don’t think, ever does, and no-one ever did this to me ever in the Whips’ Office or anywhere in Parliament, even now, they don’t say to you, ‘Well, what have you done? What can you do? What do you like doing? What do you want to do?’ No one ever says that. There’s never an opportunity ever to say formally, ‘This job’s going to be vacant, do you want to apply for it?’ Even if we know this is going to happen. So there’s never anything like that. Basically you get a call from the Prime Minister and it’s, ‘Do you want to take it or do you not?’ And you end up usually taking it, don’t you, because you don’t get that chance very often!

NH: These different departments that you worked in, how did they compare as departments? Did they feel different, for example were they culturally different?

DH: I think the essence is the same, I think, in the sense that you’ve got to grasp hold of your responsibilities, you’ve got to identify [issues], you’ve got to get the senior people in, you’ve got to try and stamp your authority on the department in a way that says, ‘Look, you know, I want this, this is the way I’m going to work and you’re going to have to work with me like this.’ And if people start to stray off that format or early on have different mechanisms, then you’ve got to drag them in and tell them ‘This is the way it’s going to be’ otherwise it will just flow away on its own. So I tried to, all the time, control the diary, tell senior officials how I wanted business put to me, tell them I wanted to be involved at an early stage, tell them I wanted to have discussions about particular priorities and topics. If I’ve dragged you in for a discussion, it’s because I wanted to have a discussion, not because I’m doing it to fill my day, you know? To try and just put some structures around it in terms of a management approach to taking on issues in the department.

NH: And is that something you’d observed other ministers doing?

DH: No, it’s just something I do. It’s just something I did personally. If I’m responsible for something, I want to know what it is I’m responsible for, what the challenges are, what the department’s doing about

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it, where my input's needed, how I'm going to account, because ultimately I take the view I account for everything and, you know, anything you do, I can be on the front page of the paper tomorrow and therefore I need to have some elements of understanding. I want some management reporting. So if I started a project or started an issue, I'd have regular meetings to have updates about the issue and project because I wouldn't want to start something and not finish it. So it's about management as opposed to being the person who's on the end of a stick. [laughter]

Jo Casebourne (JC): Do you think your management background and experience was helpful for that?

DH: I think it was. I mean, I think particularly for me, I got elected when I was 35, and I stood for Parliament in the same seat I'm now the MP for when I was 29. And had I won at 29, I wouldn't be as good a person as I thought I was in the job I did having lost at 29 and won at 35, because the six years I did in between, in terms of my outside-parliament career development, actually meant that when I went into jobs later, I drew on that management experience. So that six years of being a manager, to be able to [ask] 'Well, what are my priorities, how do I account for things, how do I hold you to account, how can I challenge you?'

Actually by the time I got to the end jobs, like with the police and counter terrorism job for the last 11 months of the Labour Government, having done effectively 10 years as a minister, I felt comfortable from day one in that job. I just walked in and I felt comfortable from day one. I think the officials were surprised at how easy it was for me to slot into police and counter terrorism just having done Northern Ireland, Justice and been in Downing Street beforehand, just to be able to do it from day one. And that was really... that's just experience, isn't it? I was lucky, I had a long run at it, you know, most people may be in two to three years, I had effectively from 1998 through to 2010. So it was a good long run.

NH: And on the management side of things, what did you see as the Permanent Secretary's role in this vis-à-vis the ministerial role, how did you split up your responsibilities?

DH: Well, I suppose, again, as a minister of state, as I was for the last five years, we had contact with the Permanent Secretary, but it was generally with the Secretary of State. So it wasn't me and the Permanent Secretary, it was me and the departmental head that I was responsible for. So in Justice it was me and the Chief of Prisons, or later, as it was, the Head of National Offender Management Service. In the Home Office it was me and the Head of the Policing Section or the Counter Terrorism Section. And we would have weekly team meetings with the Permanent Secretary and I would be in meetings with the Permanent Secretary, but it wouldn't be me on a one-to-one with the Permanent Secretary on a, what I would call, a regular basis. But I saw the Permanent Secretary's role then as being chief adviser to the Secretary of State but also chief implementer of the things that we ultimately decide, chief option creator, chief deliverer and chief adviser.

NH: Talking of secretaries of state, how did you establish good working relationships with them? You must have had a few different people...

DH: Well, actually, it worked all right on all of them... who did I have? I had Paul Murphy in the Wales Office, who I knew because it was a Welsh thing and he was fine. Paul was quite relaxed in the sense he was much slower to temper than the others. I had Peter Hain in Northern Ireland. And Peter was great, because Peter just said, 'Get on with it' because he had enough to be getting on with. He'd say, 'Get on with it'. He'd trust my judgement. And there were occasions whereby I could defend the departmental interest, because we had the six departments against the Secretary of State and he would listen to me. And the department then thought I was the bee's knees, because I actually defended their departmental interest when something was happening that originally wasn't going to be in their departmental interest within the whole departmental [business] as a whole. Then I had Alan Johnson. Alan just let me get on

with it and Alan was fine. Alan was, you know, chilled. There was no tensions, in my view, between me and the secretaries of state. And even with the Prime Minister when I was the PPS to the Prime Minister, my job was slightly different. I wasn't a minister in the strict sense of the word, but I went to Cabinet, I went to the pre-Cabinet meetings, I saw 20 hours a week with Tony, roughly. I had six hours of his time I could fill. And then my job was to be over here to soak up the arrows, and then to facilitate meetings with people who needed to see the Prime Minister and act as a gatekeeper and to tell him what he wanted to know, what was happening here, and then, by and large, he used to ignore it! [laughter] But at least I know what was happening here. So, he said he appointed me because he knew that when I told him something, I would respond the way the Labour Party would respond. So if I went 'Bloody hell, that's terrible', then he'd know it was going to be terrible. But at least he knew it was going to be terrible! Then we'd work through it and we'd work out how we'd get round that and who we needed to pick off to make it less terrible, but we'd still, you know, have that discussion.

NH: In establishing your top priorities in departments, the main things you wanted to focus on, would you come up with those or would they be set by the Secretary of State, or would you do them together?

DH: Well, no, sometimes the secretary of state would do them and sometimes the secretary of state would establish a priority and give me a delegated area and say 'Go away and do that'. Sometimes I would pick things from the myriad of issues that the civil servants were looking at that I really wanted to focus on. And then there were some things that just came out of things I was interested in doing, you know, so I wasn't happy with the way in which we had the reoffending rates in prison. So I tried to start to look at how we could develop more community-based sentences, the under 12-months stuff that the current government are doing now. We tried to work through a lot of stuff on that. Then some things you pick up from just visits. There were a couple of things from Northern Ireland where I went to an area on a visit about something else and I saw something that was a genuine problem, or people came to me with the issue, and then I'd decide 'Yes, I'll focus on this, I'll try and do something about it.' To be honest, in Northern Ireland, they were very good at responding to things like that, the minister, you know, wanted to try and do it.

JC: So moving on to think about the day-to-day reality of being a minister, how did you spend your time?

DH: I would spend my time, well, any particular job? In most jobs I would start the week, every week, with a weekly forward-look meeting. I'd always come down, I'd say to the office 'I'm yours between 11 o'clock Monday morning when I get down from North Wales and I'm yours between five o'clock Thursday night' and in that time that's ministerial time in London'. I would start the week with a forward-look meeting at what we're doing this week, what we're doing in the next four weeks. I'd have the Press Office in to say what are the issues that are likely to come up this week. I'd then have regular meetings with the key officials during the course of the week on key issues. I would ask for briefing meetings on current topics, depending what it was. If I was dealing with legislation, that obviously takes up a chunk of your time. We'd look at a communication strategy for the things we were trying to achieve. I would pull in people for regular briefing meetings on updates on things that we were doing. For example, the prisons' population issue, when we arrived was a basket case and I established a weekly meeting to go through the figures to look at why people were in prison, who was in prison, what the issues were. We had a prison-building program that was ongoing so that was never looked at before with the previous minister, so I established a weekly meeting to go through what was happening with that. And I'd do that type of thing. I would have, at the end of the day, in Northern Ireland, we'd have two or three boxes a day, in Justice one box a day, in the Home Office one box a day, six days a week at the end with general stuff in. I would make time to go through all the PQ [Parliamentary Questions] answers, I'd be careful to sign. Everything I signed I realised was public. If there was a particular briefing note from an official that I wanted to discuss, I'd bring the officials in rather than just sign it off.

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And what else would I do? On prisons, I made sure one day a week I walked the floor, so on Thursday afternoon or on Monday, usually Thursday afternoon or Thursday morning, I'd do a prison somewhere on the way back to North Wales. So I'd have one day a week walking the floor. And that meant in the course of the two years, I did about 75 prisons, and that was useful because, again, you'd pick up things as you're going round, you'd talk to the staff, talk to whoever. I'd try and arrange meetings with stakeholder groups. We'd have some advisory groups established from stakeholders on prisons, I brought together all the voluntary sector groups to give me their view on that. We'd meet them on a regular basis. I'd meet with the staff who worked in there, the prison officers, PCS [Public and Commercial Services Union] and others on a regular basis. I'd do the same with the police. So it's about meeting stakeholders, looking outside. I'd also do obviously the public front-of-house stuff, which is the front-of-house bit that most of the public see which is, you know, I'd go to conferences and speak and set down agendas and respond to issues. I'd do the television stuff, I'd do the newspaper stuff, I'd do the House of Commons stuff. That's the front-of-house thing and that wasn't as it is now for me. Then it was accounting for things or telling people what I'm going to do - I'm in the department trying to sort out the undergrowth. The front-of-house bit, that's not the most important bit, the most important bit's in the department. That's the bit I account for.

JC: How did you balance those competing demands of media, parliamentary business, departmental...

DH: Well, it would depend. I mean, there are days when you wake up and then your whole day is gone out the window because you've walked into the office and the prison officers have just walked out in every prison in the country. So that's a different day than if you're planning something else. If a prison burns down in Leicestershire, because there's been a riot, that's a different day than if something else happens. So there are certain priority things. I was with the Prime Minister when 9/11 happened. He was doing a conference speech in Brighton about employment measures at one o'clock and by two o'clock he wasn't. So there's different competing demands and you go with the priority. If someone's been shot dead in Northern Ireland, that's a different priority than what you were going to do and talk to an old people's group about ageing policy. You know, that's what happens. Ministerial life is trying to decide as well what's important, what's urgent? And what is more long-term and dealing with that according to priority. If I didn't respond to a particular problem today, in the paper, it might be going to be worse tomorrow.

JC: We were going to ask you about one of those unexpected crises. So perhaps one of the ones from your time at Justice, if you could talk us through what happened and how you dealt with it?

DH: Well, I'd say the prison officers' strike. I was on holiday somewhere and we arrived back from holiday that night, nine o'clock at night, and no mention was made of this. I was overnight in London. I came in the office at half-past seven in the morning and the first thing I heard was the prison officers were going out on strike at eight o'clock that morning. And they hadn't given us any notice of this at all. This would be in August 2006, I think. And basically the prison officers walked out eight o'clock. So the first thing is, well let's bring in the senior managers to say 'Well, what's the contingency plans, who's going to manage this?' We had a gold command which I went down to visit immediately, sorted out what their briefings were, looked at what my response was to the gold command with the Secretary of State. And then the second thing is to get the prison officers to say, 'Well, do you want to come in and talk to us this particular lunchtime?' The third thing is 'You're breaking a piece of legislation we've got in place and we can issue an injunction against you in the courts', so I need to get the legal people in straightaway to determine how and when we place that injunction. Then with the Secretary of State, who was actually on holiday at that particular time, to speak to him on the phone to say 'Look, this has happened, I didn't know about it, you didn't know about it, they did it to us deliberately to blow us out of the water. This is what I've done, we've established gold command, we've established some legal advice on the injunctions, I'm making a press statement up now, this is what I'm going to say.' I did a press statement on it, we got

the injunction, we got the prison officers in. I said 'If you're not back at work this afternoon, that injunction's in court.'

They went back to work that afternoon. They had a bit of a fisticuffs about it all and then they had a very rumble for four weeks, where they were very unhappy, but they were back in work on day one.

JC: Yeah, that's a really interesting example.

NH: Jack Straw raised the same one when we interviewed him. He said he was doing a cycle ride or something with his wife when he got the call and he was in his Lycra! [laughter]

DH: Yeah, yeah! No, it's one of those types of things. Well, again, with Jack, you see, I remember when the prison burned down in Leicestershire because I'd screwed up a holiday in Mauritius previously, because unbeknown to me, nothing to do with me, right, a prison computer disc with every prisoner's name and details on had been lost and I was in Mauritius on holiday. I'd just arrived in Mauritius with the missus in August and I walked into the hotel room, and I turned the television on just to see what the hotel said, and it comes on CNN News, you know, 'computer disc lost in London'. So I said to Margaret, 'Why don't I know about this?' and then the moment that I said that the phone rang! It was the private office to say, 'We've got to tell you, there's a computer disc's being lost, and you were on a flight, we couldn't tell you.' So basically I was in the dog house. I arranged when we came back to go away for the weekend to Scarborough, just it wasn't Mauritius, it was Scarborough, so I went to Scarborough for the weekend and the moment I arrived in Scarborough I had a phone call from Jack saying that there's a prison burning down in Leicestershire and you've got to go. So I had to then say to Margaret, 'I've got to go to Leicestershire'. And we went to Leicestershire. So I screwed that one up as well! [laughter]

NH: We could do a whole other project on ministers' marital issues! [laughter]

DH: The great thing about this is that Margaret and me met when she was canvassing for me in the 1983 general election and she stood for Parliament herself twice and she was a councillor for 20 years. And while we have these occasional spats, ultimately, you know, she's on the same side. So it's all right. But it's a bit difficult to say 'I'm in Scarborough and I've got to go to Leicestershire.' 'How you going to get there, David, because I need the car here and you're in Scarborough?' 'They'll send a car for me.' 'Oh great.' So I went to Leicestershire and back, walked the burned down prison, talked to the prison officers, smoothed a few brows, speak to the press, go back to Scarborough.

JC: Well, moving on from crises, what do you think your greatest achievement was in your time in office?

DH: Well, gosh, that's always the hard one, isn't it? I think, if I'm looking at things personally, I think it's just helping with the Northern Ireland peace process. I think, you know, it's not your achievement but you play a small part in that bigger picture. And I have dealt with people who were not talking to each other, were trying to kill each other and when I went to Northern Ireland with Peter Hain and with the Prime Minister still dealing with that, there were still people killing each other and there were places in Northern Ireland that I couldn't go to. When we left in Northern Ireland, I could go anywhere and there were not people killing each other to the extent that they were then. So although you're only playing a part in that, you know, I've held roundtables with the IRA, the Real IRA, the UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force], the UDA [Ulster Defence Association] who all tried to kill each other. Talking through issues and working through issues and spending hours investing time in them and smoothing egos and trying to look at solutions and trying to get people back to the table and putting threats down and cajoling and eventually getting them to take responsibility for the assembly and then walking away from it.

JC: What do you think contributed to that success? You've touched on some of it in terms of the cajoling role...

DH: I think it's about trying to understand... In that case, it's a different role ministerially than others because at that role, we were taking decisions in the departmental responsibility areas. And we would take decisions which we just took and we could take with no worry about the electoral consequences. So I could say 'Now I'm going to reorganise the local government from 22 authorities to seven', and we could decide we're going to do that and I know that I would never have a cross by my name in any of those 18 constituencies because that was just the decision we could take. But in taking those decisions, when local people didn't like it, well, I would then be able to say to them 'Look, that's what we're doing, if you don't like it you go back into bloody government then, get back into the Assembly, you know, I'm taking this decision because you're not.'

So it was a bit – you could push people – so it was a different role to maybe other things that we did. The police and criminal justice and counter terrorism job only lasted 11 months until the great humbling in 2010. So there wasn't much chance to do things in there. To get the prison population issue under control was quite important at the time and to try and put some dampers down on that was good. But I think Northern Ireland was my favourite job of the whatever number, seven I had or six I had.

JC: And what did you find most frustrating about being a minister?

DH: I found... I'll give you two examples of deep frustration. They both relate to the Ministry of Justice. There was one job where I determined that I was going to increase the prison sizes and do some new prisons and we agreed we were going to build a new prison in, as it happened, North Wales, where there was no prison at the moment. I went through about six months preparation with officials saying, 'Well, look, we're going to do this, this is where we are, that's what we want to do, this is it.' We had some suggestions coming forward from officials for prison sites.

I knew it was controversial because I was in North Wales, so I had a consultation in North Wales about the sites. The consultation came out with one specific site. I said to the people 'We're going to do this.' We had a whole discussion about it, we costed the whole thing, we did everything as a whole, I planned it all through. We got to the stage where I was going to make an announcement. I said to the officials, 'I'm going to make an announcement now.' 'Fine, no problems.' I went to North Wales, we had a special conference. I made the announcement at the prison site, rapid cheering, great enjoyment, everything else. I came back, fabulous, marvellous, all going well. Two days later, officials came to me and said, 'Minister, we didn't buy the site before we made the announcement and you said we had and I found out we didn't.' Now, I can't be – when I go through everything and I say, 'Have you bought the site, have you signed the papers?' I can't micromanage someone signing a piece of paper. I can say to people 'Have you done it?' And I had to cancel the project because as soon as we'd announced it the site cost went up, because we hadn't signed it. We had to cancel the project and put it somewhere else eventually and it only happened six months ago where it's now been built on another site. But I took the officials to pieces on that, because the difficulty you've got is you can't micromanage everything. You can say 'Has it been done?' and if you're assured it's been done, then you have to take that assurance that it's been done. But what you can't do is, you can't be the whole thing. So on that delivery issue, that was one of the big frustrations, are things being delivered as you said they're being done?

The second thing is where you are accountable for things, but you're not responsible for them. So the one I use on this talk I do, is that I was once on the front of The Sun with a dunce's cap on my head with a picture on the front saying, you know, 'Prison Dunce.' And the reason I was on the front of The Sun was because G4S [security services company] had tagged an individual who had been then seen in the pub having three or four pints and the victim had seen the individual in the pub having three or four pints and they'd gone to the press. And it turns out that G4S had tagged the individual in the house but they'd tagged his wooden leg which he'd taken off and left at home. So I ended up being on the front of

The Sun because G4S have tagged the wrong leg. Now, what do I do about that? Am I accountable for it? Yes, I am. Am I responsible for it? No, I'm not. But what I did do was bring the Chief Executive of G4S into the office and give them a thorough dusting down and try and put in place some mechanisms to deal with that in the future. So if it's about frustrations, it's about being kebab-ed for things that you didn't do but are accountable for by somebody else's mistake, but being responsible for it and also for not having proper delivery on certain things.

By and large, most of the advice I got was OK. Most of the officials I met were fine. Most of the people who worked with me tried to do the best they could do. Only once did I have someone say, 'It's your job, Minister, to deliver departmental policy and this is departmental policy.' I said, 'I don't agree with it, it's not my job to deliver things I don't agree with.' And that never happened again. But mostly it's failure to deliver on things that you think you've agreed.

JC: In terms of making government more effective, are there lessons from those sorts of experiences?

DH: I'm not sure there is, I think it's just going to happen in any big organisation. I'm sure if you interview permanent secretaries, they'd say sometimes you're reliant on the people down the chain. And you've got to put in place systems that say are you happy with everything, but if you get assurances that something's going to be done, when you're in the MoJ and there's 70,000 staff, someone downstream is going to do something that means you're going to be accountable for it. And, again, the best thing to do in those circumstances is to either, if it's your responsibility to accept it, if it's not your responsibility to explain it and to make sure it doesn't happen again or you try and stop it happening again.

JC: What were your relationships like with Number 10, the Treasury, the centre of government when you were in departments like Justice?

DH: They were fine. It was interesting, when I was in Number 10 looking outwards, you're in Number 10, you think you're the centre of the universe. And you're in Number 10 and everything's happening and people are deciding and talking about things. But when you're outside Number 10, Number 10 is a bit more distant. It only took an interest in us if things were going wrong. And I was out of Number 10 for two years with Northern Ireland, where I dealt mostly with Tony more because it was Northern Ireland. But in the time I was in from 2007, in Justice, with Gordon through to 2010, I didn't really have much contact with them because they only bothered us if something was going wrong. That might be, again, Gordon as opposed to Tony, but it wasn't that hands-on with us and we didn't have that much... I've got that picture there with Gordon going to Liverpool Prison [gesturing to photo] but that's the only time that, you know, he took an interest. He wanted to go and do a prison visit and we went to Liverpool Prison. But there wasn't much day-to-day stuff.

And maybe it's Gordon, I think, with due respect, maybe it was Gordon. I was once brought to Number 10 to participate in a meeting and ended up chairing it because the Prime Minister didn't. After I went, I thought I was just going to talk about something and I ended up chairing it! So it was less hands-on. But on Cabinet committees, which is another side of it, I never found those particularly exciting, useful or of interest. Most things were decided well in advance and it was basically a formulaic discussion. It wasn't, in my view, the ones I went on, and I was on 22 Cabinet meetings when I was in the Wales Office, it never actually had much of a deciding impact or discussion, it was basically very formulaic.

NH: Were there more effective or informal ways of working with other departments that happened outside of that?

DH: Yeah. I mean, what you do is we used to have, for example, when I was in the police department, we had a youth crime initiative and I had the Department of Education Minister, me chairing it as the Police Minister, and we had the somebody else minister, I can't remember, three of us chaired this

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group. And we just chaired the group. And we did it and we decided to get our officials to throw in pots of budget and we would do it informally between three ministers. But it would never be a Cabinet committee type thing. We had Cabinet committees where you turn up, there's a brief written, there's a departmental position, you say your departmental position and the chair of the committee agrees what they've all agreed beforehand, before the discussion took place. So it was a bit formulaic. You know, it had to be done but it's a sort of way of doing it, but I never found very often anything happening as a result of them that wasn't going to happen if they hadn't have happened.

NH: Thinking about the whole history of the period, so '97 through to 2010, it's often seen as a period of big change in government. What were some of the changes you observed in the way government was run over that time?

DH: Gosh. Gosh. I don't know if... You've stumped me on that one.

NH: So some of the sorts of things I'm thinking of are Public Service Agreements and targets, introducing public service reform agendas, more special advisers than there'd been in previous governments; some of those sorts of changes within Whitehall?

DH: Yeah. I didn't notice... the target stuff, I didn't notice, maybe because I wasn't involved in any departments that dealt with that. The special advisers, I found in one department the special advisers to be a hindrance rather than a help. That was Northern Ireland, I'll tell you, it was Northern Ireland - and, for example, the one occasion whereby the special advisers had boxed something on to one of the departments, and when I found out about it, which is only at the time we had a discussion in a team meeting in a roundtable, I objected and the Secretary of State backed me up rather than the special advisers. The department thought I was wonderful, because I'd stopped this thing happening. But the special advisers in that department were running a bit too free rein. They were deciding they were the ministers, they were trying to do things with us without talking to us about them. So I found that difficult, but that was only in that one department and it was very much down to the personality of that special adviser at that time. I don't think during the time I was in ministries... I think I just got my head down and got on with it, you know. I didn't need Downing Street's permission to do things, but you would consult with them. I had a good relationship with Tony as the Prime Minister, so if you saw him and talked about things, it was fine. The others, no-one bothered me and the fact I wasn't sacked after 12 years says that they weren't too bothered about what I was doing, either in a bad or a good way. But you weren't sacked, so you just get on with it!

NH: Talking about not being sacked, how would you define an effective minister?

DH: I think an effective minister is somebody who understands the department's issues, primarily has good judgement and good judgement is about making a call that is the right call. And the right call might be a political call, but it's equally just the right call and it's being able to know that you've made the right call and being able to defend the right call in the House of Commons at the time. And so judgement is the key for me, and then how you get to that judgement. It's about how you manage the department.

So it's about good judgement, in my view, and good judgement means getting to a decision where you feel you're happy with that decision. And that means managing your department. So that means being in control of your department and that means being in control of your diary, being in control of understanding the issues, being in control of who decides - making the department know that you have confidence in them, but you are going to decide, and making them know that you are watching what they're doing and you're going to make them account to you because you have to account to the outside. And I have two masters: the House of Commons and the public and I have to account to both. So, you know, my starting point every day is 'If I sign this piece of paper, can I defend the decision I have made

to the public and to the House of Commons?’ And if the answer is no, then I’ve got to explore it more, I’ve got to decide it more, I’ve got to make sure it happens. So for me the key is judgement.

NH: And are there any sort of practical pieces of advice you would give to a new minister?

DH: I would say make sure you control your diary because you’re not just a minister, you’re a father, you’re a husband, you’re a constituency MP, you’re a son, you know, all those things matter as well.

NH: And how did you do that diary thing, did you just sit down with it at the start of the week and tell them what you did or didn’t want to do?

DH: I just said to them... Look, I’d sit down at the beginning of each week and say, ‘What are we doing this week and what are we doing next month and what are we doing anything else?’ And nothing would go in my diary unless I agreed it. I’d micromanage that, because otherwise I’d find myself all over the place. I would always say to them, you know, ‘Monday to Thursday’s yours, Friday’s mine because I have to get re-elected. I’ll do things on Saturdays and Sunday for you if I have to, but I need to know what they are, I need to work through those things.’ I’m also a father, I’ve four kids, I’ve got a wife, I want to stay married, I’m a parent, a son. You know, I missed my dad’s death. I was in Northern Ireland, my dad died. I was in Northern Ireland, I could have been home, but I was in Northern Ireland, you know, it’s just where you are, you’ve got to manage these things. So you’ve got to do all those things really.

So number one is diary. Number two is to make sure officials know that you are interested and you will have input, you will stop things happening or you will make things happen because otherwise the Civil Service is great, it will run itself, right, it will run, and unless you intervene and make sure you need to know what your parameters are then, it will still run itself. And if you don’t set the parameters down straightaway they will work around your parameters because they have to run a department whether you’re involved or not. So my job was always to try and get involved and give certain parameters to make sure I knew what I was doing.

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