

Ministers Reflect

David Mundell



4 February 2020

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

2005 – present: Scottish Conservative MP for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale

1999–2005: Scottish Conservative MSP for South of Scotland

Government career

2015–19: Secretary of state for Scotland

2010–15: Parliamentary under secretary of state for Scotland

David Mundell was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Akash Paun on 4 February 2020 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.

David Mundell talks about his nine years as a minister in the Scotland Office, including his work with the Liberal Democrats and his relationship with the Scottish government during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and after the 2016 Brexit vote.

Tim Durrant (TD): You first entered government after the 2010 election as a parliamentary under secretary of state at the Scotland Office. What was the conversation you had with David Cameron on that day? What did he tell you about the job?

David Mundell (DM): Well, the main thing he told me about the job was I wasn't going to be secretary of state for Scotland, obviously, because I had been a shadow secretary of state since December 2005. As people who know about these events will recognise, when he phoned me, that wasn't a very good signal. If somebody else phones you and asks you to come to Downing Street, that's a positive, but if the prime minister phones you, that's not necessarily positive. He phoned me to tell me it's a coalition deal, the Liberal Democrats had 11 MPs in Scotland and they'd asked for the Scotland Office. Obviously, we only had one MP.

He felt that it wasn't an unfair request but hoped that I would be willing to serve in the Scotland Office with Danny Alexander, who was then, for 16 days, the secretary of state for Scotland – which actually wasn't unhelpful, because when I became secretary of state for Scotland, I knew if I got to 17 days, I wouldn't be the shortest-serving [secretary of state] ever [laughter]. It was a pragmatic conversation. Rather than a "I'm phoning to give you a great opportunity in government", it was "I'm phoning to say actually you're not going to be secretary of state for Scotland, somebody else is and I hope you'll accept that and move on". But obviously, also, making it very clear to me that he wanted to ensure that I brought a Conservative perspective into the Scotland Office. Although it was a Lib Dem secretary of state, we didn't want to lose the Conservative perspective or the political elements to the role of promoting the Conservative cause in Scotland.

TD: Did he give you specific guidance as to what he wanted you to focus on in that role?

DM: He wanted me to work constructively with the Liberals. Obviously, at that stage, we had a minority nationalist administration in the Scottish parliament. His objective was to grow Conservative support in Scotland. So, I think he wanted me not to lose the political element of the role and to provide a backdrop which secured Scotland's place in the United Kingdom and see an increase in the fortunes of the Conservatives. I'd been elected for the second time on that occasion as the only Conservative MP in Scotland, and in fact, in 2010, our vote didn't go up (compared to what happened in the rest of the UK)... I think it went down in Scotland. He wanted a Conservative in the Scotland Office, so that was very much the focus of our discussion then and often subsequently.

TD: How was it working with the Liberal Democrat secretaries of state?

DM: I knew Michael Moore [secretary of state for Scotland 2010–13]; I knew Danny [Alexander] well. I mean, that didn't last very long [Alexander was secretary of state for just over two weeks, moving to the Treasury shortly after the coalition was formed]. I had a couple of conversations with Danny and Jim Wallace, who was the advocate general, he was a very experienced Scottish politician. Jim was a very important component of the Scotland Office during that 2010–15 period. I felt that I wouldn't have had any difficulty working with Danny as secretary of state, and in fact that was important later on because, effectively, during the referendum period, Danny was the lead Scottish minister in relation to the referendum, even from the Treasury. During the period 2013–15 he led the referendum effort from a Scottish perspective in government. Michael Moore, I knew reasonably well. He had a neighbouring constituency and Scotland is a relatively small political bubble.

I never had any personal difficulties with Michael himself, and we were only about a year in when the independence referendum issue consumed us. We were on the same page on that issue. On some issues, I was conscious that Lib Dems in government had very different views from the Conservatives in government – [the] Home Office was an obvious example. That wasn't the case [on Scotland], we were very much aligned in terms of where we were in our objectives. There were frictions from time to time, but they mainly came from special advisers and others in the political system, who wanted to have the Lib Dems more to the fore than the Conservatives, and there were those, me in particular, who wanted to ensure the Conservatives had our place. There were issues that arose, such as issues around media opportunities, and there were some programmes and debates as it unfolded where there was no Conservative on that programme because the government was being represented by the Lib Dems. Those sorts of things caused issues. But in terms of actual day-to-day working, I never had any real issues in working with Michael, he was very professional.

TD: What was it like working with the civil service in the Scotland Office, both here in London and in Edinburgh?

DM: I was obviously completely new to the civil service. I'd had the formal pre-election meeting that you're required to have, because I was shadow secretary of state for Scotland, and I had dealings with the Scotland Office in relation to the Calman Commission [on Scottish devolution], which had been set up in that period pre-election. But I think until either you're (a) a civil servant or (b) in government working with them, you don't really have a full concept of it. Even then, it took me years really to get my head fully around it. Obviously, the important thing in Whitehall is to understand where the decisions are made, who makes the decisions and who influences the decisions. Day one, you don't necessarily understand that, which is part of the reason why I think the civil service likes the carousel of ministers.

I was a very unusual minister because I was in the Scotland Office for nine and a half years, and then you know it, if you do that length of time, you know how it works. Initially, I think that as with most ministers, you accept the format that you're given and it's only as you become more experienced and more confident that then you look for a different format. So, inevitably, when I was first a minister, I would probably accept nine out of 10 submissions. By the end of it, I probably accepted one out of 10. But that didn't mean they were wrong, it just meant that I had formed my own view. Even if you don't agree with a submission, it can help you form your own view or support it. I think that some of the things that we did through these initiatives from [Francis Maude](#) and working with the Institute for Government [on preparation for government] and others was helpful. Here in parliament, if you're a parliamentarian, you only see the parliamentary side of it, you don't see the civil service, so you are not prepared for that.

TD: Can we talk a bit more about those Francis Maude initiatives? One of his ideas was for greater appraisal of ministers – what was your view on that?

DM: Well, I was very open to that because I would rather know what the civil servants thought of me than not. If I was doing things that were unhelpful or not effective, I'd prefer that somebody was saying that to you, because then you can change your behaviours, or you can re-assess how things are working. I find doing, for example, 360-degree feedback very helpful because some of the feedback from the civil service wasn't necessarily what I would have anticipated, for example. I think over time, I realised they welcomed frank and open feedback and what they were looking for in ministers is clarity in terms of what it is that you're looking for, what you're looking to achieve, what the outcome is. I tried to be as honest as I could, for example, in the things that I did. People can invest a lot of time and effort in something that isn't going anywhere and it's much better to know that and be clear about that. I always sought to have less submissions but better-quality submissions, to learn to reject things early. Like, we're just not doing this. And therefore, not wasting time and effort in going through something then we're not going to do it. I think you learn.

At the end of the day, I saw a lot of my role both as minister and secretary of state as really identifying from all the things that come in what is important, what isn't. That comes through political experience, through understanding the government's objectives, understanding the impact of things. It's like somebody standing next to a huge water pipe with a cup, and you've to get the right bit into the cup of water, out of all the noise and everything else that's going on. You need to identify what is important, what we can make a difference, what we can actually do. Over time, there's an opportunity to do that, but not on day one because you don't yourself know what's noise and what's not... you've just got to work through it. Particularly in relation to Scotland, relationship management was extremely important, and we had to put a lot (during my time both as minister and secretary of state) of emphasis on relationship management, for example. It's not

something necessarily the civil service is terribly well set up for. And again, that requires change.

Akash Paun (AP): You already mentioned the Calman Commission, which reported shortly before you came into government. In your role as minister, what was your involvement in taking forward those recommendations into what eventually became the Scotland Act 2012?

DM: Well, both coalition partners had committed to implement the Calman Commission, so we came into government with a common agenda to do that. What it required the Scotland Office to understand was the cross-Whitehall working required to take through a piece of legislation. Because ultimately, the Scotland Office is not a department that is responsible for any of the things that were in the Calman Commission, apart from one or two of the constitutional elements. So, it gave me a huge insight, because I was partly deployed to do that. I did a lot of it myself as well for the 2016 Act, learning how you have to get other departments on side, work with them. After both these exercises, I came away with huge admiration for Donald Dewar and how he managed to get the original Scotland Act through [in 1998]. Because each of these departments has their own priorities, agendas, it's rarely yours. In 2016, I remember going to a meeting with the DWP [Department for Work and Pensions] and they had about 20 people there. They had somebody responsible for about every word in the clause. I had about 20 people in the department [laughter]. Both of these Acts are huge, real examples of cross-Whitehall working. Ultimately, they wouldn't have been possible without the full support of No.10, and then you come to understand that, in the great scheme of things, knowing how No.10 works and working closely with people at No.10 is very, very important to drive forward these cross-cutting initiatives. Departments on their own are rarely going to sign up to them.

AP: Were there particular blockages in the passage of the 2012 Act where you did need to look to the prime minister to help?

DM: We were very fortunate in that period, I believe. George Osborne was the chancellor and Danny Alexander was in the Treasury, and they were very onside for helping bring about the tax changes. Although we've gone much further in the 2016 Act, the tax changes that came in during 2012 were quite radical in that context. Some ministers made a difference in the different departments and they together were very helpful in making that happen. Then you run into other departments that are further from the fray in terms of the politics of it. And they are very resistant to anything changing and you have to go back and say "actually, this is a government manifesto commitment, and this has to be implemented, and I am sorry you don't like it but...".

AP: Is there an example you're able to give?

DM: I think those departments that are less engaged in Scotland. DCMS [Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport] might be an example because I think with the Scotland Act, there were some powers around appointments and the BBC, and the procedures for that. The point I am making is that departments that are more in the front line with Scotland, with Scottish MPs, with the Scottish government are much more receptive to this, and departments that didn't have regular dealings with them found it more difficult.

AP: Then, during the passage of the Scotland Act 2012, there was the 2011 Scottish election which returned the SNP [Scottish National Party] majority. Did that affect the process of legislating for the Scotland Act?

DM: I think the Scottish government were keen to push the envelope after that, in terms of things that they wanted included in the Scotland Act 2012. Generally, their position was we don't support this because it's not independence, but we'll take it anyway. My recollection is, after the 2011 election, there was a list of additional demands that were presented. And we, I think, held the line on that, to say our commitment is the Calman Commission. I think there were one or two issues that were added in with agreement, but generally they had been dealt with separately anyway. But we held the line. I think there was still something on spirits duty, there was a range of new issues that came forward from the Scottish government, and we didn't accept those. Clearly there was also an increased imperative to complete the legislative process and demonstrate that we could be trusted to deliver on a promise of further devolution.

AP: Did you start at that point thinking about what might come next?

DM: No, we didn't. Clearly there were discussions about should these additional powers be granted or not that were asked for, but there wasn't a view that this was the first step and there would be another Scotland Act in four years' time. When we concluded the work on the Scotland Act 2012, we didn't do so on the basis that we'd be doing a 2016 Act.

AP: What did happen immediately after the 2011 election was recognition by David Cameron that there was a mandate for a referendum and that negotiations would begin on the terms of that. What was the process for taking that decision? Was there any disagreement within government about whether that case should be accepted, or was it quite clear cut that you would do that?

DM: As I recall, there had been discussion, and when it appeared a possibility, which I think was before the actual election date, that there could be a majority Scottish National Party government about how we would respond. I think David Cameron was always very clear that if there was an SNP majority government at that time, there would have to be a referendum. A lot of what was subsequently discussed was what the nature of that

referendum, what the process for that referendum would be, rather than would there be a referendum. I think in the immediate aftermath of that Scottish election, David Cameron was very clear that there would have to be a referendum. We then had quite detailed discussions in government about how that referendum would be facilitated from the UK government holding it, to the outcome that was eventually followed of transferring the powers from a time-limited period to the Scottish parliament, and then what the nature of the terms of the referendum would be. There was a lot more discussion around the nature of the referendum than whether to have one or not.

AP: In the negotiations over what became the Edinburgh Agreement and the conditions for the referendum, what were the trickiest issues to resolve?

DM: For a long time, there was a discussion about whether there should be three options on the ballot paper, and there was quite a lot of prevarication on the part of the Scottish government about whether there should be the option of *status quo*, enhanced devolution (sometimes called devo max), or there should be independence. There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing on that issue. The UK government's position was very clear, that it should be a yes–no, in–out type question, that there shouldn't be a third option. There was obviously timing, who should have the say over timing and the issue of whether 16- and 17-year-olds should be able to vote in the referendum. Then there were various administrative issues about the nature of campaign, regulation of the campaign and the wording of the question.

AP: Once agreement was reached and the section 30 order [under the Scotland Act 1998 to allow an independence referendum] was passed, we were then in a long campaign period in the first nine months of 2014. What was your experience of being in government during that period, and how well do you think the government collectively organised itself to fight that referendum?

DM: The first point is, in that referendum, compared to the 2016 referendum [on EU membership] for example, the government had a position. It was UK government policy that Scotland remain within the United Kingdom, so the government promoted that position and sought to do so. Just as the Scottish government's position was that Scotland should be independent. They sought to promote that position as well. So, clearly the governments, within the rules of propriety as guarded over by senior civil servants, were both active participants in that referendum. For example, the launch of the Scottish government white paper was a major event. The chancellor made what many people regard as a pivotal, definitive intervention about the UK government's view on Scotland's ability to use the pound. In the period before the final six weeks, the governments were very active participants in the debate. We weren't neutral.

I think sometimes civil servants did find that a little bit uncomfortable, because it was unusual. To ensure we were successful in the referendum, we had very effective cross-Whitehall structures that took the referendum forward. The chancellor chaired a cabinet

sub-committee in relation to the referendum and when the chancellor chairs something people listen, so it was dealt with at the highest level. Danny Alexander chaired various groups, as we did within the cross-Whitehall groups of civil servants, senior civil servants like the then-permanent secretary in the Treasury, Sir Nick Macpherson, were heavily involved. I felt that we did manage to put together a very effective cross-Whitehall structure for the course of the referendum. The prime minister had Lord Andrew Dunlop – he was a key adviser at No.10. He and Ramsay Jones did the Scottish media bit of it. So, I was confident in the immediate run up to the independence referendum that it was the priority of 10 Downing Street.

AP: During the very latter period of the campaign there was the famous ‘Vow’ on the front page of the *Daily Record*, an initiative that you were closely involved in. Do you have any reflections on the implications of the Vow?

DM: I’m keeping what happened for my own memoirs [laughter]. I think there was a recognition during the campaign that although most people were positive about the Scottish parliament, that it didn’t have the full range of powers that people would want it to have, and particularly, it didn’t have this financial accountability. That was across the political spectrum. My Conservative colleagues’ view was, well, we’ve created an entity that can spend money, but it doesn’t have any requirement to think about where that money comes from, and our Liberal friends wanted it more autonomous. There were different views, but there was a general view that the Scottish parliament, as was at that point, could be enhanced.

It evolved – when we concluded Scotland Act 2012, we didn’t think “oh well, this will be phase two, that was sitting on the shelf”. I think there was an acceptance that phase one hadn’t gone far enough, but at the point that we were doing phase one, phase one seemed to be where public and political opinion was. But by the time we got to the referendum, that’s not where it was – it was saying no, we want a parliament that is more powerful with tax and borrowing powers and some say over social security. These arguments had emerged in that intervening period. I think there was a need to demonstrate that post-referendum there wouldn’t be any negativity toward Scotland or there wouldn’t be a clamping down or constraining of the Scottish parliament that had brought about the call for this referendum. I believe it was important to give a signal of positivity. Was the Smith Commission [on further devolution to Scotland] exactly the right way to go about that? In retrospect, there were a few random things that it threw up and there were other things that it didn’t cover. People have argued there should have been some form of consultation, but that had to be balanced against people’s demands: “well, show us what you’re going to do”. Those were conflicting – if you take forever then people aren’t convinced that you’re actually going to do it. My view is, the Scotland Act 2016, from the start of the Smith Commission to the Scotland Act being on the statute books, [that] was a remarkably short time for such a significant piece of legislation.

AP: There was a recognition within the Smith Commission, reflected in other statements by people in government, including yourself, that Whitehall had to operate in a different way in terms of how it engaged with the devolved administrations. One of the specific changes that occurred was bringing the Scotland and Wales Offices into the wider UK Governance Group after the May 2015 election. You were there through that period. From your perspective, did that change have much of a practical effect?

DM: We delivered the meat of the Smith Commission in terms of the powers and additional responsibilities for the Scottish parliament. Other parts of it proved to be much, much more difficult in the context that we then found ourselves in, in the period post-2014, because the political nature of things didn't decrease, it escalated. The environment in which we operated and also the context of Brexit referendum was much more challenging. I regarded one of the key priorities of the Smith Commission as actually getting people to understand the devolved settlement.

AP: In Whitehall and Westminster?

DM: Whitehall, Westminster and Scotland. At that stage, in the polling, the average person in Scotland did not know that the health service was a devolved responsibility. There was this argument about having two governments – about who does what and whether they're doing what you want them to do. It just became impossible to do that, because there was so much noise around the Brexit referendum and around the political dynamic than there was in the 2015–17 period. The SNP had won 56 of the Westminster seats from Scotland and I was the only Conservative MP. It was a challenging political environment for all of these things to take place.

So, I think the creation of the Governance Group was the right thing to do, but I think the environment and point of time in which it happened then didn't allow it really to follow through. We were then on a course, which we didn't understand at that time, where these other issues particularly around Brexit then flowed into what was a huge political argument around the powers of the Scottish parliament *vis-à-vis* powers returning from the EU. For a short period at least, there was an anticipation after the [independence] referendum that the Edinburgh Agreement might have been adhered to and both sides would respect the outcome and we might move on. That didn't last very long. There were people complaining about things on 19 September [the day after the referendum]. Parliament wasn't sitting that day and, as part of the 'Vow', [in the Daily Record] a motion was to be put down, but it hadn't been put down. This was portrayed as an immediate betrayal, so it didn't last very long.

So, I think that, in that context, there was an expectation that perhaps, certainly in the civil service "well, we've had that referendum and we'll move on", when in fact we didn't move on and we haven't moved on. Therefore, the Governance Group was in a context of better governance, whereas actually we were caught still in a campaign. And that's where we are now, this is a campaign, it's not about more powers. It's clear there will

never be enough powers. Either you accept a devolved settlement, or you want independence. There isn't some middle way on that. I think we didn't, in that period, enter the environment we thought we would.

AP: After the 2016 Brexit referendum, do you think there was anything that the UK government could have done to reach agreement with the Scottish government, for instance on the EU Withdrawal Act, which ultimately was passed without the consent of the Scottish parliament?

DM: No, I don't. I think the Scottish government wanted the EU Withdrawal Act to be passed without consent. That was the outcome they wanted. There was a deal on the table, they didn't accept that deal. The Welsh government accepted a deal, and the Scottish government took the deal back to the first minister of Scotland [Nicola Sturgeon] and she rejected it. In my view, and I'm not pretending to be objective, that was a circumstance she wanted. She wanted to create an impression of disrespect of the Scottish government. I think it would have been perfectly possible to have reached agreement, and at the start I thought we would be able to reach agreement, but by the end of the process I did not think we'd be able to reach agreement. We were only able to get that legislation through because we got agreement in the House of Lords where there was a recognition that the stance taken by the Scottish government was an entirely political one. It wasn't based on reason, having debated the minutiae of that for hours.

AP: We're now in a situation where Scottish government is pushing hard again for a second section 30 order, the ability to hold another referendum. The UK government position has been clearly not to allow that.

DM: Not to agree to it.

AP: Not to agree to it. What's your view of that approach?

DM: My view is, we had a referendum in 2014, we had the Edinburgh Agreement at that time, which Nicola Sturgeon herself signed along with Alex Salmond [then first minister of Scotland]. At that point, they said this was the gold star of such agreements, it recognised – as she did again last week – that for there to be a referendum there has to be agreement between both governments. Our position – and I think it's the right position – is that we adhere to the Edinburgh Agreement and we respect the outcome of the 2014 referendum. A lot of people were told – and it's in the Scottish government's white paper – it was to be a once-in-a-generation event.

AP: Do you think that if the SNP were to win an overall majority next year on a manifesto commitment again to push for a second referendum, that would make the UK government position potentially unsustainable?

DM: No, I don't. I think it's also very clear with people as to what our approach is, so I don't think that's the case. We've decided where the balance of these responsibilities

lies. In 2011, there hadn't been a referendum, it was very prominent in the SNP's pitch going into the election. This time, we've had a referendum which was projected as a once-in-a-generation event and with an agreement to respect the result. I don't accept any of these arguments about significant change. It was known at the time of the 2014 referendum that there most likely would be an EU referendum. It is clear still that whatever the majority of people's reason for independence, most people have repeatedly said they don't want another independence referendum because they regard it as a very divisive and unhappy event which creates division between friends, family, workmates, in the pub, in the street. I think, as long as we're very clear that people understand that whatever the outcome of the 2021 election, there isn't going to be another independence referendum.

AP: If the UK government can hold to that.

DM: That will be a very clear position. The Scottish government, the Scottish National Party in particular and their Green allies are going to go into that election on the basis of if we get a majority, then we should be able to have an independence referendum.

AP: In the meantime, though, what do you think the government can and should do to make the case for the Union such that perhaps the SNP doesn't win a majority?

DM: I think there are a number of things that need to be done. Some of them are for the UK government, some of them for third parties, some of them for politicians in Scotland. I mean, obviously, the Scottish government needs to be held to account for its record in government, which, from my perspective, I would argue is not good on health, education, transport and these issues. So, in an election in Scotland, for the Scottish parliament, I'd like to see that election about domestic issues, but I'm not hopeful about that because we fought the last four or five elections in Scotland about constitutional issues and identity politics. So, it would be a marked change if we get to that point.

I think the UK government does have a role in ensuring people understand the benefits of being in the United Kingdom to Scotland, and indeed the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom. In the same way that the Scottish government made the case for independence every day, and as every part of every policy consideration or communication they make, we have to do the same in relation to the benefits of being in the United Kingdom. Particularly given our policy position that the other parts should remain in the United Kingdom, we need to make the case for that.

TD: I'm interested in the relationship between the government here and government in Scotland. With the possibility of a referendum hanging over them is it possible to have a proper working relationship between London and Edinburgh?

DM: I always find behind the scenes it was always possible for civil servants to work together, and I think over time both sets of civil servants understood how far their

ministers could go. After all, the Scottish National Party regime has been in power for a long time, so I think the civil servants were very familiar with how it works and its priorities. So, behind the scenes, in relation to all from the EU Withdrawal Bill to the Scotland Act, that there was always a cross-government core, a small team of senior civil servants who were in regular contact. I always encouraged that, just as I was always very clear as we went through the Brexit process that the permanent secretary in the Scottish government should be included in the UK government's briefing and be in the loop rather than not. I think that's important.

I think there are a lot of good working relationships, a lot of the unsexy detailed stuff got through. In fact, even in the context of Brexit, lots of regulations about paint were all agreed. Because the Scottish government doesn't want to have different paint than is available in England [laughter]. You know, they don't really want to do that. There are lots of these things behind the scenes that it is possible to agree and I think good and experienced civil servants know the limit of that. The nature of Scotland and Scottish politics, it's lots of window dressing. We have this thing called the JMC [Joint Ministerial Committee, which brings together ministers from the UK and devolved governments], and we'd have quite a productive meeting in it, and then afterwards the Scottish government would just go out and do an immediate interview saying this was dreadful and disrespectful and the whole rest of it, and I'd go out and say it's been great, and we're all chums really [laughter]. Actually, people from the BBC, ITV, at the end of it, would just say "we've used a clip from the last time because you're both saying the same thing and you always say the same thing" [laughter] On detail, there's a lot of good work, but there's a lot of froth as well.

Lord Andrew Dunlop has done a report which must be somewhere in the system into some of the aspects of inter-governmental working. Structures that were appropriate as envisaged 20 years ago aren't necessarily appropriate now. It's evolved, I think most people also objectively accept in the first eight years of devolution when we had a Labour UK government and Labour-led Scottish government, Gordon Brown was a very pivotal individual in the UK government and Scottish politics. Lots of things were done through party or informal channels, so the first attempt at inter-governmental relations really only emerged in 2007 and even as they were progressing, you got into the most contentious issue possible of a referendum and tried to develop processes and procedures in a hostile environment. It's very, very difficult. In the first few years, none of these things had bedded in – it makes it very difficult now.

TD: You were in government in coalition at first, then there was a period of majority government, and then minority government after the 2017 election. How did the three different periods compare and affect your day to day?

DM: Well, obviously, the last period was extremely difficult because we lived from day to day. In terms of planning for me in particular, it meant that it was virtually impossible to go to Scotland because we were held here all the time for votes... and the government

business was often decided at short notice, or moved along or even dropped... you really had a very, very difficult backdrop to operate in. I remember we spent a lot of time determining our input into the then proposed Withdrawal Agreement Bill [the legislation needed to implement the EU Withdrawal Agreement] – there were officials working on that, having meetings about that, and it never saw the light of day. So, it's a very difficult environment to work in. I think, in that period, what's important is really to identify what you want to do and just try and get certain specific things done but accepting that other things are just not going to happen. Here are some of the things we can do, let's do them and let's not worry about things that we cannot. We're not going to get this through parliament, we're not going to get it through the internal sign-off procedures in government, let's focus on things that we can do. So that really characterised the 2017–19 period.

2015–17 I think was the most positive, from my perspective. The government did have a functioning majority most of the time. We were able to get the Scotland Bill through, again we got that through very quickly and were able to demonstrate having made a real difference, and then look forward to other things that we could do. But, obviously, the Brexit referendum then changed not just the prime minister but the political dynamic. And then really, from that point onwards, it was all about Brexit.

TD: You left government in July 2019 when Boris Johnson became prime minister. What was that process like? What was going through your head at that point?

DM: I hadn't been a supporter of Mr Johnson, so I didn't anticipate staying in the government, although I had said, because I think Scotland is very challenging and I was a very experienced individual within that environment, that if he had asked me to stay, I would have stayed. But I just got the sense that that was not going to happen. It was reasonably orderly in the sense of that, on the day that I left government, I did Scottish questions [in the House of Commons]. So, I did my last performance just before Theresa May did hers.

It was a reasonable way to end it, but because there was a deadline looming at that point, there were a number of things that I wanted to do, so I did work towards trying to achieve that. Most of the things we got over the line, things like the borderlands growth deal which was a very important project for me personally. We got over the line most of the things that we wanted to do. We got a new government headquarters in Edinburgh that was going to be called Queen Elizabeth House. We got the approval for that. So, from the point at which Theresa May stepped down to the point that it looked likely that Boris Johnson would take over, it was about just getting through things. And then, not long after he had seen the Queen, I got a call to say he wanted to see me in the House of Commons, and that was again like David Cameron phoning up in 2010, it wasn't a good sign. Because again, if you're not being asked to go to Downing Street then...

I think it was perfectly... he was perfectly personable, I don't have any personal animosity. Essentially, he said in the meeting he wanted his own person, and as prime minister that's what you're entitled to do. And that was it, and then it's just over. We just immediately left the Westminster estate, because otherwise you're just bumping into people. So, we went to the pub and that was it, and the civil servants kindly packed up all my stuff and that was it. But then, the House of Commons bit is even more brutal, because they... almost within minutes of you having found out, they arrive with crates to move you out of your former office [laughter]. Whereas the civil servants, they packed for me from Dover House [the London HQ of the Scotland Office].

AP: What achievement are you proudest of from your time in office?

DM: I think it was vitally important to deliver the 2016 Scotland Act in the aftermath of the independence referendum in 2014. We were able to take that piece of legislation through parliament in a very short period and implement in full the recommendations of the Smith Commission, making the Scottish parliament one of the most powerful, devolved parliaments anywhere in the world, bringing it additional powers in relation to taxation and welfare. I think being able to put together a cross-Whitehall team to ensure that we got full government sign-off for the bill (subsequently the 2016 Act) was a major achievement with a lot of work behind the scenes. I think it also helped in something else that I am very proud of, that during the period in which I was secretary of state for Scotland, support for independence did not rise despite all the other background issues such as Brexit at that time.

AP: And finally, what advice would you give to a new minister on how to be most effective in office?

DM: I think it's very important to work closely with your civil servants: they are there to help and advise. But you also need to be confident in your own aspirations, what you want to do, and you'll give clear guidance to civil servants as to what it is you want to achieve, what the output you're looking for is. I think if they have clarity, then they will help and support you to achieve your objectives.

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